

Fantasy Tales



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THE LEAN WOLVES WAIT

By
JOHN
WYSOCKI

Brian Lumley
Pat McIntosh
Dénys Val Baker

A MAGAZINE OF THE WEIRD AND UNUSUAL

FANTASY TALES

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STEPHEN JONES, *Editor.*

DAVID A. SUTTON, *Associate Editor.*

Fantasy Tales is happy to be able to publish Patrick Connolly's first story, a tale that we think you will agree is very well wrought. Patrick is a graduate in English and has been writing for a little over a year in the genres of fantasy and science fiction. He is also writing a series of stories about London's dockland. The tale we include here lives in the rarefied highs of the ghost story of the kind that M. R. James and Robert Aickman have made famous. We hope you are suitably moved by what awaits...



"Everything looked the same, but for Jane, everything felt different."

At the End of the Road

By PATRICK CONNOLLY

Illustration by RUSSELL NICHOLSON

THE needle wavered and pointed to the figure 60 which was partially illuminated by the faint phosphorescence of the dial. Jane felt relieved to have left Ashford behind but apprehensive about the dark grey monster of London which lay ahead. It loomed large in her imagination as the unknowable at the end of a road

familiar since childhood. Lifting her eyes suddenly from the dial she filled the emptiness of the moment with the sight of the woman beside her. Lisa, she knew, was thirty-three but with her delicate features she might have passed for ten years younger. Only a certain harshness about the mouth mitigated her Peter Pan qualities. Just a

thin application of make-up masked the face with which Lisa prepared to meet the world, but Jane did not think of such things. To her Lisa was Lisa; strong and capable, the woman with a passport to a new world. Jane's aspirations were the mainspring of her desire to enter this new world. She knew that, with Lisa at her side, it would be alright: I just know that it'll turn out well, she thought to herself.

The car droned on, heedless of the high mission with which Jane had invested it. Lisa swerved to avoid a rabbit in the road. She muttered one of the oldest of words. Even that assumed a kind of grace when Lisa used it, for she exhibited a dictional command of the filthiest phrases. Jane believed that the older woman stamped her personality upon even the most casual utterance. She switched on the radio. "And that, as if you didn't know, was the Three Degrees with 'Take Good Care of Yourself', and now for all of you travelling on the roads here is an ice warning..." With a sudden movement Lisa's left hand deserted the wheel. She twirled the knob until the dulcet tones of Radio 3 filled the car. 'Style' was the single word which flooded Jane's mind.

"You'll find London a damn sight more interesting than that Kentish dormitory. There's art there, real art. Not the kind you hang on walls, either."

"I never met anyone worth meeting in Ashford, not really worth meeting. Typing all day and two evening classes a week."

"There's more to life than that. I used to be the same, no interest, no drive. Now I realise that, given the correct attitude, nobody need be a slave to a typewriter or anything else for that matter. I can help you Jane. After all, we're far from strangers now."

Jane felt the warmth of a slight inward blush. She smiled as confidently as possible. She felt that Lisa had earned her allegiance and so she relaxed in her seat. Jane thought of herself as a woman about to escape from phil-

istine depths into a universe of poetry and music. The Adult Education classes had convinced her of this. They were the motivating force whereas Lisa was the means. Yet somehow her emotions interfered with this clinical analysis. Lisa had taught her much and a debt deeper than mere gratitude had to be acknowledged. Jane began to feel slightly uncomfortable. She glanced at Lisa once again and was immediately reassured.

They came to a bend in the road where an overturned car lay by the roadside, quite deserted, and perched crazily on the edge of a ditch. There was a shudder in the air which transmitted itself to Jane.

"What's the matter?" asked Lisa.

"I don't know. I just came over all queer. As if something inside me had changed. You know how, if you listen hard, you can hear your own heartbeat. It's there; it pounds away in there all your life but you can't hear it unless you listen. Well, just now, I felt a sort of tingling. Made me dizzy. Then it was gone, but I still feel as if something has changed. Not outside, not something you can measure. Inside me. Just uneasiness, I guess."

"You let your nerves get on top of you too easily. Try to relax. It's probably apprehensiveness. Don't worry."

Yes, I'm being silly, thought Jane, but the strangeness remained with her, insistent, intangible, defying definition. The familiar road became no less familiar. Everything looked the same but, for Jane, everything *felt* different. Perhaps it was that crashed car which worried me, she thought, simultaneously recalling her reputation of being highly-strung as a child.

"Did you see that wreck?" she asked.

"What?"

"That wreck."

"Yes, of course. I'm not blind."

Jane was by now aware of the danger signals which occasionally ruffled the apparently composed surface of Lisa's temperament but she persisted nonetheless.

"I wonder if anybody...?"

"...might have been hurt?" Lisa's seemingly helpful interjection was betrayed by an ominous undertone of agitation.

"Oh, there was nobody in sight, so I suppose..."

"Then why bloody ask? How should I know? I'm not a damn clairvoyant. Anyway, I'm too busy driving to indulge in a minute pathological examination of every car left by the roadside. In Greenwich you'll learn to be less concerned with irrelevancies."

"Sorry."

An awareness of the humiliation welling up within her reduced Jane to a wary silence. She surveyed the scenery and thought moodily, It could have been us. The watery January sun cast its dissolute light upon them only intermittently. Its bleary attention was punctuated by the brief shadows of bare birch trees, denuded by winter's ravages. Jane recalled her decision to leave Ashford forever, her mother's righteous displeasure at losing her daughter to the profane city - the daughter who had foolishly 'given up a good job in the office at Parkinson's' to dash off with 'that immoral woman from the literature class'. Jane realised with some regret that her mother's moral indignation rested upon simple foundations which could not, possibly should not, be shaken. Consequently it had been a subdued farewell and the small figure of her father standing silently beside that mountain of maternal anger had somehow saddened her even more. That was all behind her now, however. Thirty minutes ago they had left Ashford and in a very short time the outskirts of London would engulf them. The young woman thought of liberation, of 'entering the foothills of a new range of experience', of taking the city to her heart and, of course, of that city taking her to its great heart. Yes, she would be free - no longer bound by the petty moralities, as she considered them, of Ashford, Kent.

THE buildings of Greenwich appeared to be endowed with a shabby elegance. Lisa told Jane of the

Naval College (Wren) and all about Flamsteed House. Architecture and science seemed to have a symbiotic relationship here. Jane imagined the small circles of friends in flats, hammering out their idealisms over cheese and wine. Yet, somehow, an air of strangeness haunted the place. The cold, marble-fronted of some nautical palace reared up before her, giving the lie to that aesthetic warmth which she sought. The 'Cutty Sark' clipped no more those liquid deserts between India and Britain. It lay stationary, diminished; reduced to the haunt of schoolboy shoals as they swarmed under the eye of bright young schoolmasters who stood shivering in the weak sunlight. Jane turned her gaze away from the ship and, as she did so, the memory of that night with Lisa (only a few days earlier) surged into her mind.

It had been a delightful evening and her views upon the tragedy of Keats both as man and poet had been well relieved. Lisa had been especially kind, lauding Jane's tact in 'sailing between the Scylla of mere biography and the Charybdis of romantic indulgence'. They, the leading light of the Ashford literary circle and her new disciple, retired to the small room rented by Lisa. Coffee facilitated the conversation which soon turned to Lisa's involvement with the Women's Liberation movement. The elder woman's views at first startled and then, gradually, began to tantalize Jane. Lisa's words were at once firm and comforting and, although Jane could hardly bear to admit it, her description of a previous lover began to inflame the younger woman's imagination. This was perhaps because apart from one or two incidents that she described as 'sin-dark corners', Jane had never known, 'really known', a man. But she could not agree with Lisa: "There must be more to men than that... There must!" And then they were arguing - at first with words, then struggling physically. Her remembrance of the sudden simultaneous laughter and the reassuring touch of Lisa's fingers enhanced the

glow upon Jane's cheek.

"Here we are, Park Road. Are you alright?" Lisa quizzed as she parked the car.

"Fine," answered Jane as she fought back the spectre of that night in Ashford. After all, she thought, they were the best of friends now. Their relationship had been forged in the afterglow of that confrontation. "Oh yes, I'm fine."

THE inhabitants of Park Road, Greenwich, adhered to a discreet, almost charmed, life style. In consequence the two women settled into their new flat with the minimum amount of fuss. The ministrations of the landlady, Mrs. Seaton, occasionally interrupted this initial serenity. These ministrations took as their form short bursts of domestic information and instruction, delivered with brusque, almost maniacal energy. Mrs. Seaton stood matronly in the hall beside a grandmother clock (which permanently displayed 10.15) and advised them upon the handiest launderette, the most accomodating garage etc.

"Tomorrow's my day for going in-to London so I thought I'd better tell you all this now. You won't see much of me tomorrow."

Mrs. Seaton, it transpired, did not like going into London. Her route necessarily involved the Blackwall Tunnel because she always visited her sister, who lived in Poplar. She did not like the tunnel.

"Like going down into the mouth of Hell," she chirped with jocular frenzy.

"So long as you come out at the other end you've nothing to worry about," ventured Jane.

"Hell isn't a tunnel. Hell is other people."

Lisa's allusion to Sartre escaped the landlady. Her face became as impassive as a Grecian sculpture.

"We all have hell inside of us," Mrs. Seaton remarked cautiously and, assuming the look of one who fervently believes in personal salvation, she disappeared into her private sitting-room. The

greying head, seemingly disembodied, reappeared around the door almost immediately. "Oh, by the way, you'll probably bump into my son, Malcolm. He's a nice boy. I think you'll like him." The head dematerialised and the door closed, leaving Jane and Lisa to the silence and unpacking.

That afternoon Jane met Malcolm Seaton on the stairs. This initial encounter resulted in an invitation to a coffee-bar which the landlady's son both frequented and favoured.

"It's not just any coffee-bar," he explained, assiduously emphasising the word 'any', "there's José, for example. He's a really first-class flamenco and classical guitarist; a genuine artist, you might say."

After explanations this invitation was extended to include Lisa.

"Until tonight, then."

Malcolm's feet drummed a chaotic rhythm and he bounded boyishly down the stairs: 'until tonight...'

Occasionally upon meeting a person, one cannot help imagining that one has met him before and that the memory of him lies buried, obscured totally by the kaledoscope of past events. Mal, for he insisted on being addressed by this shortened version of his name, was a case in point. Jane somehow felt that she knew him. Despite Mal's easy, familiar manner his demeanour did not betray his years. She concluded that it would be a vain and pointless exercise to try and guess his age and that his manner was responsible for that feeling of having met him somewhere before.

"What made you girls come to Greenwich?" Mal asked, carefully spooning sugar into his coffee.

"We came to see if it was there," Lisa ventured facetiously, raising her voice above the endless rhythm engendered by José's fingers as he stretched them furiously across the unwilling guitar-strings. "Is that a good enough reason?"

Mal's swarthy features oozed confidence. Lisa responded to this inquisitive certitude as a challenge whereas Jane decided that the man was simply easy to be with. He had that boyish charm which young

women find so fresh and interesting in a man. Consequently the two women's reactions to Mal's series of short anecdotes dating back to his Merchant Navy days (mostly aboard the small steam-ship *Pluto*) differed in accordance with their respective impressions of the man. Jane thrust the upper part of her body forward and across the table, all angles and attention directed towards the narrator, whereas Lisa, being less impressed, adopted a pose of polite disaffection by allowing her eyes to wander from her companions to the guitarist, to the door and back once again to the yarn-spinner.

"Do you know what wind is? Not just a breeze but a big wind? It's when the whole of a great lumbering mass of air gathers itself together and, with a single purpose, forges its intangible power into an instrument of destruction. It'll try to disintegrate whatever lies in its path. It tried to destroy me in the Indian Ocean."

His face assumed the guise of a terrified sailor, choking up the last ounce of courage.

"...And then there's what it does to the ship. She's been your home, your friend, your lover for a month or more."

He leant upon the table with both arms. Jane recognized the suggestion of the dedicated salt leaning upon the ship's railings.

"...But the wind makes a monster of her. It sucks up the ocean and flings mountains of green and white foam against her bows. She labours along, struggling with the sea, and every time she goes down you wonder if it's the last. Somehow she rises and, in doing so, she heedlessly shunts you across the deck, tossing a man against the iron bulkheads of his home."

Jane now fancied that his eyes possessed a distant and defiant light; like a lantern upon a buoy, cast out amid the eventide mists of an oriental bay.

"Is that why you left the Merchant and came home?" Lisa asked.

"No. You can learn to live with the wind and the sea. The time came when I could no longer serve. There are Captains and Captains. Some ask

too much."

"And some are incapable of taking orders."

Mal's response took the form of a searching aquiline stare rather than a verbal retort. His countenance oscillated between the smile and the frown as does that of a man discovered in the act of grappling with some intangible inner torment.

"It is enough to say that I was thwarted in my ambitions and maliciously treated. I was not the author of the crimes the Captain accused me of. I would not remain subject to their partial laws."

"And the crimes?" Lisa had detected a melodramatic strain in his voice which Jane had failed to notice. She was determined to press home her advantage.

"Lisa!" Jane's face flushed with anger at her friend's audacity.

"Your friend is very presumptuous. I have not challenged her with the spectre of her past life."

"You volunteered the information," Lisa interposed.

"On the contrary, you solicited it. I was merely trying to explain about the wind and the sea. My insubordination is not your concern. It was a long time ago. You cannot possibly understand why or how I fell, for you know neither the ways of the sea nor the fears of the men upon the sea. That part of my story is not for you."

"But, to be fair, you have implicated us in a way," Jane remarked, attempting to bridge the divide between her old friend and the man, whom she felt was a romantic and tragic figure.

"Your involvement with me springs from another cause. For each of us the past is a kind of failure. Perhaps that is why we are here now. My fall was great, some said even majestic, but that is not your concern. Many people arrive here hoping to make a new start, to begin again. They're all fools - but men must be bound by manacles of folly."

He shrugged his shoulders enigmatically. Lisa's perception of the rapacious glint in the man's eye troubled her not only because it indicated his dangerous nature

but also because Jane seemed to harbour only sympathy for this man. The younger woman, however, was convinced that Lisa had behaved deplorably. Not only had she cut Mal short at every opportunity but she had also pryed into the man's tragic secret at such short acquaintance. Yes, when she drifted into this kind of mood Lisa was an impossible person - impossible!

Mal leant back in his chair and regarded them with ursine benevolence. He quickly rolled up his shirtsleeve, baring his left arm. The bright folds of a green snake were displayed upon the biceps. The double-helix of this painted serpent slackened slightly as he flexed the muscle, removing the sinewy impression of the creature and replacing it with a flattened image spreadeagled upon the taut skin.

"See that," he said, "I went in for that in Hong Kong. Painful too."

"Why did you let yourself be tattooed like that?" queried Jane, simultaneously thrilled by and fearful of the strange beast etched upon the man's arm.

"It's the mark of a sailor. Most of the lads had one...at least one. The cook's body was almost entirely covered by them but he was a bit of a crank, you might say."

Lisa made a single comment: "Subtlest beast of all the field."

"Like another coffee?"

He addressed the question primarily to Jane, choosing to ignore Lisa's acidity. Pandemonium reigned: José strummed on, indefatigable and discordant. Mal disappeared, coffee cups in hand, into the semi-darkness beyond the glimmering alcove of candlelight in which the women sat.

They had the inevitable row that night. Lisa reprovingly attacked Jane for her naiveté. Their divergent opinions of the man became the battleground between them.

"I'll wager that the nearest he's been to Hong Kong is the Chinese restaurant in the High Street."

"How can you say that? It's arrogant. You hardly know the man.

Can't you see that he has suffered?"

"I know enough about men. He wants you to suffer along with him. All that mysteriousness and the wind and the sea: it's just a ploy, a melodrama. He's playing with your emotions."

"Well I don't care. I like him. He's interesting and I feel at ease with him."

"Jane, you've told me yourself that you know nothing of men. A man like that can tear the life out of you. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to use you in some way."

"How can I ever find out anything if you shelter me from every man in sight?"

"This isn't Ashford. At times you give your trust too easily."

"You're afraid of him, aren't you? Why does he frighten you so?"

"I'm not afraid!" snapped Lisa. "I'm concerned for you, that's all."

"Concerned for yourself, you mean. Well, I like Mal and I intend to see him again."

"It's your funeral."

And so it went on, long into the night.

As she lay in bed Jane regarded Lisa's shoulder which protruded from the bedclothes like an alabaster outcrop, stonily arched and stiff, its translucent surface diffused in the half-light.

I love Lisa, she told herself, but she's too protective. Why must she see Malcolm as a rival? The three of us could have been such friends and now that's impossible. She closed her eyes wearily, and lay her dilemma to rest.

THE following evening found Jane and Malcolm in the 'Gloucester' public house.

"My mother doesn't like the tunnel. 'The Mouth of Hell, Malcolm', she says. It's my aunt, you see. She's weak in health - always has been. You might say she's a kind of invalid, a chronic case. So mother has to visit her and that means the tunnel. Funny thing, though, mother has never been able to explain exactly why she hates it. You could call it a

phobia, I suppose." Mal grinned wolfishly, "Now, as for me...well I like the tunnel. It's a link with the world on the other side of the river, an artery of communication."

"Do you go into London much?" asked Jane.

"Oh no. Not now. You might say I'm settled here in Greenwich. There's no need. Anyway, I have little time for London, but the tunnel itself interests me. It has fascinated me since childhood, always seeming to be full of mystery and adventure. As a boy I would stand and watch the cars vanishing into the very bowels of the earth. I'd wonder where all those people could be going, being swallowed up in the ground like that. Mind you, it was the old Blackwell Tunnel then. There was a narrow strip of pavement which ran the whole length of it," he stopped and sipped his beer. Jane smiled.

"And I suppose you just had to walk through it."

"Correct."

Mal brushed his sleek dark hair back between his fingers and regarded her with an expression akin to that of a schoolmaster's glance of approval towards his pet pupil.

"But it wasn't the only unknown land waiting, undiscovered, at the other end although that was a part of it, of course. No...I became more and more involved with the experience of the tunnel itself."

"The experience?"

"Yes. You see, as you made your way along, cars raced past no more than a couple of feet away. I was excited by that."

Jane pictured a boy picking his way tremulously along the narrow margin of safety, surrounded by the pandemonium of hurtling horsepower, the proximity of danger thrilling his blood, making his heart race. As he talked Mal conjured up the image of the audible malevolence of each heavy lorry, its profound roar contending with the resounding echoes of lesser vehicles and gaining a brief, shattering ascendancy as the glaring yellow eyes of the mechanical monster approached. She imagined herself in the tunnel: an intrepid

but fearful explorer, convinced that the lorry must hit her, grind her to atoms, and then roar on, impervious to the fact that it had smashed the tiny flame of her life forever.

"You might say that the tunnel's a kind of loudspeaker. It amplifies everything, the noise..." he paused for an instant, "...even the fear. I often wondered what a crash, a really bad crash, would sound like in there."

"We...I saw a crash. What was left of one, anyway. On the way up here. A car by the roadside. It was green...no, maybe it was blue. I don't know...all collapsed in upon itself, just a heap of twisted metal. Made me shudder. I haven't really felt right since. Funny how those things can stick in the mind. Morbid, really. I remember thinking 'could have been us'..."

He stared at her meaningfully and said, "In the midst of life... Would you like another drink?"

He returned with the drinks and resumed his subject, "You know there was another thing about the tunnel which fascinated me. On either side of the river, and only a few hundred yards in, there were two flights of concrete steps. I used to climb those and there, from the top, you could see the giant fans, the tunnel's ventilation system. To me they seemed to be the source of the tunnel's mystery, the generators of the eloquent and magical whisperings of that underworld. They symbolised the tunnel's hold upon me, appearing beneath me, mystical, whirling without end."

Jane could see that he had considered the fans to be the very centres of the tunnel's power, the mechanical gods of that subterranean world, whose divination sprang from the mind of a child. In truth Mal's childhood imagination had taken the tunnel to itself with obsessive diligence. His excursions into this nether region became the sum of his boyhood adventures, and the ghoulish fantasy of the boy had erected in his mind the horror of falling, falling into the whizzing inferno below. For him those vast fans came

to represent the hub of creation, the motivating force of a dangerous universe, spinning as endlessly as the spiral galaxy in Andromeda (of which he had seen a picture in his childhood). Yet fascination can be the bedfellow of hatred.

"And so I used to throw things into them. Anything. Small stones at first and then half-bricks, specially brought for the purpose. Whatever I could find, so long as it was not too large to drop through the grating. I pitted myself against the power of the fans but it was hopeless. Like the wind and the sea they were immeasurably stronger than I. It was futile, you might say, but as a boy I couldn't see that, of course. I channeled all my delinquencies against the tunnel. I hated it and learned to love that hatred. It was perverse but I was entranced by its very perversity. It engulfed me by day and haunted me by night. In a way it still does, although I've learned to live with it now, even to admire it. We all have to live with something here."

"What a strange story," said Jane, half-thrilled and half-frightened by the energy of his description.

"We all have strange tales to tell," Mal remarked, regarding her benevolently.

Not for the first time she sensed the strange power of the man. His obsessions and weaknesses seemed, to her, to hold within them the very source of his strength. As the fruitfulness of a nut's kernel is held, obscured and protected, deep within the wrinkled husk of its exterior, so Mal appeared to harbour his own inner sense of some undefined salvation. His every movement suggested purpose.

"How about another drink? Oh, come on now. One won't hurt - now will it?"

His eyes glinted with boyish good-humour as he took up her glass.

mittent bouts of dizziness. Too much to drink, she thought hastily, fighting her drowsiness in order to gain a brief period of lucidity. This is Malcolm's room... Malcolm's room. But her eyes would not focus properly, she could no longer respond to the stimuli which surrounded her. Must lie down, she thought, I must lie down.

There are times when our waking hours harbour no more than our dreams. Drunkenness offers such a time. Only momentary flashes of the old sober self mitigate against this ecstasy of oblivion. Responsibility fades, laughing at our abandon. Jane, however, was unaware of these considerations. For her dream and reality ran together like the waters of twin rivers flowing into a single stream of sensation.

She felt only the slightest touch at first: very gentle, marginal pressure accompanied by the brush of his lips. 'I've never really known a man.' Such thoughts could not be hers. Hot and flushed, fighting for air, she turned on the bed. But the gentle hands, insistent, tantalizingly urgent, found new folds of flesh to touch and tease into desire. She was falling, falling, drawn into a whirlpool of fingertips and nerve-ends, and then she was clinging to Malcolm's back. His eyes were harder now, defined by their purpose, mutated into beads of energetic concentration. She rolled like the sea. Somewhere, sounding very far away, a woman was sobbing, quite gently. Lisa's face swam before her mind. Breath, as hot as midsummer...the room was whirling faster, faster...the ceiling danced crazily, weaving to the patterns of an ancient rhythm. She was very hot...pulsating inside...her heart pounded, yearning for respite...then pain and joy came together, bound together in a single spasm. Her breath became regular, echoing away into normality and she was crying, sobbing softly, with her face half-buried in the pillow.

THE faded patterns of the wallpaper swam before Jane's eyes. Her senses were racked by inter-

MRS. Seaton smiled apologetically "Oh no, dear, Malcolm's

always been like that, since he was a child really, possessed by a wild imagination. You see he always wanted to be a sailor but...well, let's say he wasn't fit."

"Never been to sea," the words danced mockingly in Jane's spinning mind as she uttered them.

"Oh no. It's just his way. As a lad he had that adventurous spirit, loved to look at the ships on the river. Oh, and the devil was in him. But he never meant harm to a living soul. Used to go down that damn tunnel, you see. Same thing. Always out for excitement. I've never liked the place since." Her voice faded on the last syllable but she quickly resumed, "Well, that's another story, anyway. Then there's his newspaper cuttings. Lives by them, he does. He's got a big file of them in his room. It's his hobby. Keeps his mind at rest. Anything that takes his fancy goes in that file, you know ... Are you alright dear?"

"Yes, yes. I must -" Jane broke off sobbing and retreated upstairs.

"You bloody little fool!" A knowing look matched Lisa's reproach. "The first man that hove into sight and you couldn't keep out of it. I warned you. I told you he was a fraud but you just had to rub up to him, thirsty as a bitch on heat, yearning for the first touch of the spring."

"It wasn't like that. I was drunk. He...I didn't even like it much. Afterwards, he wasn't considerate. Lisa, I'm sorry."

"It's too late for that."

"It's this place. There's something about it that isn't quite right."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, exactly, but I'm going to find out if I can."

Lisa's voice softened, "Alright, Jane, you've been a bloody fool and you've had a rough ride. You're not the first nor will you be the last. We can see it through together."

Lisa's right arm, all sympathy and consolation, closed around the younger woman's bird-like shoulders whilst her left hand steadily caressed the lank brown hair.

JANE's hands trembled as she eased open the drawer. She swallowed hard, her determination contending with her pounding heart. She was driven by a singular purpose: to discover the true nature of Malcolm Seaton. She was unable to decide whether the quivering uncertainty within her breast was prompted by the apprehension of that discovery or the simple fear of 'being caught in the act'. The drawer was now open. Jane concluded that she must continue her quest: to turn back now would leave a lifetime of wondering. Now she held the folder, bulging with its accretion of newspaper cuttings in her hand. The dull black square of its frontpiece appeared to encapsulate the final accusation, being the final defiant barrier between her and the file's contents. She ignored this dark censor and slowly opened the file. Her brows wrinkled. She frowned. There did not seem to be any order. The haphazard collection had only one common denominator: They were all reports of sudden deaths. They were not even arranged in a datewise fashion. It was then, as she floundered in this chaos of newsprint, that she discovered Malcolm's note. It had been folded neatly and tucked into the third page of the file, summoning her attention by a Gothic rendition of her christian name: *Jane*. She opened it hurriedly with wildly fumbling fingers. "How could he have known?" The note consisted of just two sentences:

"Dear Jane, please turn to Page 17 of my file. You will find those answers which you seek on Page 17."

ACCIDENT IN TUNNEL; BOY KILLED.

"12 year old Malcolm Seaton died because of a curious fascination for the cooling-fans in Blackwall Tunnel, East London. His grieving mother told the inquest of the boy's obsession...no blame could be apportioned...but an inquiry is to be held in connection with safety precautions... The coroner's verdict: death by misadventure."

Jane's mouth sagged, half-open with shock and surprise. How could this be? Had Malcolm a brother? A twin perhaps? As she read the sec-

ond cutting shock gave way to incredulity:

DISTRAUGHT MOTHER COMMITS SUICIDE.

"Mrs. Sybil Seaton, a widow of Park Road, Greenwich, was found by neighbours...distressed at her 12 year old son's tragic death on January 4th..."

The report was dated 12th January, 1957. This must be some kind of hideous practical joke, thought Jane. Clearly Malcolm, having a bizarre sense of humour had had these macabre reports printed. In her anger and trepidation she could not even guess at his reasons. It was simply diabolical. The third cutting on page seventeen reduced her state of mind to a peculiar mixture of horror and despair:

Jan 21st 1975:

TWO WOMEN KILLED IN ROAD ACCIDENT.

"...the car overturned...icy road conditions...difficulty of identification...but were later named as Lisa Stapleton and Jane Goddard... A police spokesman said that in both cases death was probably instantaneous..."

Her mind felt blank, totally void. She could not grasp any thought for more than an instant. In an effort to exorcise the mesmeric spell of page seventeen she turned the page, finding a paragraph which she took to be written in the hand of Malcolm Seaton:

"The spirit cannot die. Its flame cannot be quenched by the darkness which descends upon the failing body. Its virtue exceeds mortification, for destiny outlives the fading flesh. Consumption comes to all men alike, yet the organs of virtue and the harbours of sin succeed the flesh. Alone the soul survives: nurtured in heaven, naked in hell. There is poetry in this continuance: beyond death we are rewarded with ourselves."

Jane spun round as she heard the door closing behind her. Her grip tightened upon the file. Malcolm Seaton stood before her. Never had he seemed more alive.

"Jane..." he began softly.

"What's the meaning of this? If it's some kind of joke then it's in bad taste."

"Haven't you guessed? Actually, it's to do with our deaths."

"I'm not interested in acting out a part to satisfy your obsession with death. I'm going."

"Where? This isn't a play or a game, Jane. Sit down. You must listen to me."

"How could you be so unkind?"

She threw the file across the room in her fury.

"Not unkind, not I. You might say it's fate. Don't worry Jane. We'll always be together, always. Of course, there's no real future, that's dead to us. You see, we can have only memories. Actually, we are really no different. Things are as they were before, almost."

"You're mad. Are you trying to say we're dead? You're crazy."

Malcolm bared his arm. The tattoo was missing.

"Alright, I'll prove it to you. Remember the snake, Jane. I just made you believe in it. We can do that here, now. Life is a collection of illusions and impressions. These form the past, but the living believe in the future, a future of which they know nothing. For us there is no future, only the past. Ultimately, for all men there is only the past."

"Is that why I felt so strange since coming here, why things kept going round and round in my head?"

"Yes, Jane."

"I see, yes, I see."

"But we have a certain freedom: to be ourselves, to dwell in the remnants of our consciousnesses. If we like we can weave fictions from our past and forge them into a kind of future. The dead can remember, must remember. Only the living can forget. We are now the creatures of another author: his bidding is our life. He has given us our past. It may be a source of pain: that is our fate, even our providence. My dreams of the sea remain with me. They were part of my past. I have no future, you have no future, Lisa has no future. We are damned, bound each to another by the bonds of fate, chained together in an eternity of memory and suffering. That is all there is or shall be: our tale admits no redemption. You see for us, my darling, the story ends here."



A Sonnet for Insanity

By MARION PITMAN

"BY UHLUTHC!" cried Raoul suddenly, "I know you! I know you from an old engraving in Tfarcevolph's library - you are the writer of the forbidden book, Derzahla Ludba, the mad Arab."

"Mad?" the old man's eyes widened incredulously, "Me? Do I pay fifty marks for a book no-one can read?" And he shuffled off, cackling, and jingling his poke.

"Life," said Raoul pensively, "is not at all what I expected."

"That says something for Life," said the Dragon; "Let's hope death isn't what you expect either." And he began to sing.

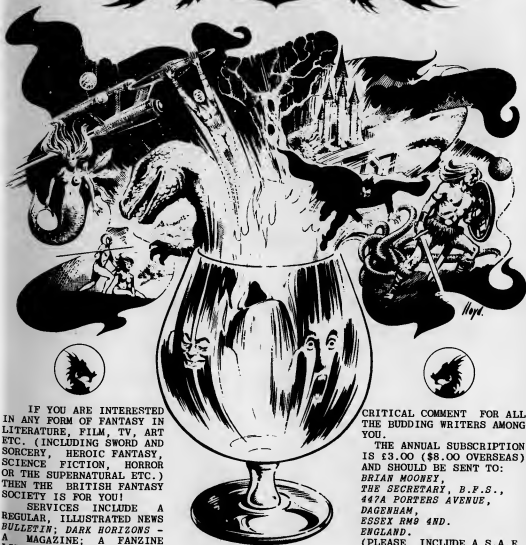
"The corpse light glows about his sweating face,
He fancies, as he gazes in the glass,
And flowers wither where his footsteps pass,
Their colour to death's pallor giving place,
When over them he runs his dismal race;
For hell's black hounds seem shadowing the grass
Beside him always, whether slow or fast
He runs; or if he stop, then in their place,
Lolling their livid tongues, they patient wait
To catch the scraps that fall from his despair;
They sniff the sweet madness in the air
And imaged in their eyes glows hell's wide gate.
He weeps. The devil laughs. The damned below
Call 'Come! For you have nowhere else to go.'"

"But if that's true," protested Raoul, "that he has nowhere else to go -"

"It's only true," said the Dragon, "so long as he believes it. No-one can condemn a man to hell except himself."

"What?" said Amaris, "usurping my profession? I'll give a man hell for an insult, or sell him heaven for a hundred livres; but if a man can damn himself, what's a poor priest to do?"

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John Wysocki's short stories have appeared in the American magazines, *Weirdbook* (*The Accursed Glade and Doom*) and in *Toadstool Wine* (a Robert E. Howard pastiche, *The Shaman's Head*). Herewith we are happy to present the writer's first appearance in a British magazine, with a convincing narrative set in the Russian frontiers where...

"In the dark forests of the north the lean wolves were running."



The Lean Wolves Wait

By JOHN WYSOCKI

Illustration by DAVID LLOYD

IT WAS early 1917 when Sergi Starnakov took his leave from the front. His departure was rather abrupt but he was a veteran and used to these matters. Things were going poorly for Holy Mother Russia. Superior German equipment and discontent on the home front were slowly grinding the courageous Czarist armies to bloody dust. Pounded to reeling fragments

by German artillery from without and rotted by revolutionary doctrines from within, the army, and the government, were crumbling. But the Czar's generals were going to try one last offensive, one last attempt to pull the country together with victory.

It was a dark and troubled time. A blanket of doom covered the land like a foul miasma. Strange proph-

ets were afoot in the provinces preaching doctrines of doom. There was famine and in the dark forests of the north the lean wolves were running.

The men waited patiently in a little hollow behind the lines while a barrage prepared the way for their charge across the lunar no-man's land. Sergi sat his accursed horse, its muscles still full and rippling compared with the skeletal nags of his fellow cossacks. Not many knew the story of that horse, and fewer believed it. It had been tainted with the curse of the vourdalak in the wilds of Siberia, or so it was said.

Meanwhile the guns boomed and Colonel Grabiev peered through a pair of field glasses at the German wire and gave a cry of manly delight at each orange burst in the sea of grey mud and sky. The cossacks were grudgingly silent, having little respect for the effectiveness of their own artillery. The colonel's clean, pressed uniform contrasted with the grey muddy greatcoats that hung in tatters from the cossacks backs.

Sergi, though a sergeant, had risen from the ranks and was as coarse and near illiterate as the moujiks he commanded. He was a big, heavily muscled brute, dark and bearded with a vile temper. For this reason and also the fear in which the men held his blood-drinking horse, there had never been talk of putting a bullet in his back during a battle.

The barrage was due to end in a few minutes, but there was no appreciable damage to the German lines. Sergi, too, had a pair of field glasses, torn from the neck of a dead samurai in the Japanese war. He took these out and trained them on the enemy. There he saw more machine guns than he could rightly count. It was a very bad place to think about attacking. Sergi looked up at Colonel Grabiev, who was checking his gold wristwatch for the tenth time. Already he could hear the dull roar as the infantry hesitantly left the advance trenches. A great grey-clad wave rose from the earth and rolled towards the Germans.

As Colonel Grabiev calmly took an English cigarette from its ebony case and lighted it, the German machine guns began to chatter. The grey wave began to ebb and fall. Colonel Grabiev took a long pull of his cigarette and let the blue smoke ooze lazily from his nostrils.

"Come on lads, let's get that peasant scum back into the fight!" he shouted, pointing to the reeling infantry. "Bugler sound the charge!"

No one moved. The only sound was the snorting of horses against the tumult in the background. The bugler casually dropped his instrument in the mud.

"I gave an order!" cried Grabiev, crushing the cigarette between his fingers. The cossacks looked on with dull, listless eyes that evaded the Colonel's. Sergi frowned and studied his fingernails, his carbine across his lap. They had been slaughtered long enough.

"Very well, you dogs," said the Colonel, bravely reaching for his revolver, "have it as you will."

It cannot be said that Sergi was the only one to fire, but he was the first, and it was his bullet, entering beneath the jaw and exploding out the back of Grabiev's head, that killed the Colonel. Before his body could topple from the saddle, a dozen more slugs had torn into him. He slumped down over the saddle bow and slid like a broken doll into the mud.

A bestial roar went up from the Cossacks. Those nearest the fallen Colonel trampled his body into the mire beneath the hooves of their horses. The others brandished their carbines and sabres over their heads and howled. A cry went up to kill all the officers, and as they tried to slip away the cossacks fell on them.

The Cossacks, flushed with this victory, turned their horses to the rear and egged on by a leather-lunged anarchist, they began to march on Petrograd, demanding the head of the Whore-Empress. Bottles of vodka were conjured from the very air. Many a drink was thrust down Sergi's unprotesting throat. Someone found the officers supplies

and they broke off the necks of the champagne and brandy bottles and gulped from the jagged stumps.

Sergi was already in a warm, merry mood with the liquor and violence of the afternoon. The regiment had degenerated into a drunken horde by the time it reached the hospital lines. Twice on the way they had to fight through companies of protesting reserves with sabre and nagaika.

The doctors and orderlies protested when they broke into the medicinal brandy and alcohol. But when the medics heard the low rumble about lickspittle rear-liners and butchers, they ceased their protestations and made themselves scarce. One prim, blond nurse pleaded with them, saying that the alcohol was needed for the wounded. A gruff old cossack, a hoary grey survivor of many battles, studied her for a moment, then spoke with mock solemnity.

"You are only too right, little sister." He simpered, fair licking his chops. "Excuse us our poor manners, having forgotten our poor brothers in their pain. Here comrade!" he said, handing a broken-necked bottle to a man lying in a bed, bloody bandages wound around the stump of a leg. "To the revolution!"

The wounded man took a long, long pull of the brandy. His pale face flushed. He licked his dry lips and spoke with a voice strengthened by the spirits. "Perhaps it is needed for the wounds, little sister. But it is like the old saying: 'The road to church is short and dry, the road to the tavern long and icy, but I will walk very carefully.'"

A roar went up, bottles smashed and liquor flowed down thirsty throats. Soon everyone, wounded and whole alike, were laughing and howling a dozen different songs. The blonde nurse was perched on the greybeard's knee and he was pouring liquor down her throat with one hand while he fondled her breasts with the other.

A scream arose above the tumult as the greybeard's rough hand tore her blouse. One pink breast popped free. At the sight of it the whole

temper of the mob changed. From revelry it turned to raw lust. Even Sergi sensed it as he tried steadfastly to remember the words to a drinking song a captured Uhlan had taught him.

The greybeard stared at the round globe with the pointed nipple for a long moment. His eyes glazed and he methodically tore the head-dress from her head and ripped her bodice down to her waist. Her blonde hair spilled down over her breasts and they jiggled as she twisted in the greybeard's grasp. A dull, animal growl echoed through the tent. Too long had they been in the trenches without women, and they were like wild boars in the rutting season. The rest of the blonde's clothes came off and the greybeard mounted her on a pile of her own torn clothing. She screamed until the old man stuffed the edge of her skirt in her mouth.

The score or so of nurses disappeared in masses of boiling men. Weapons were drawn and men slain as they fought over the women. Sergi grabbed a dark-eyed gypsy who fell readily into his arms. To his delight and surprise, she nibbled with her sharp, white teeth and whispered wetly into his ear as she pressed against him.

"Why don't we go outside Cossack?" she murmured, her soft tongue forcing its way into Sergi's brain. "It's much more private and comfortable in an ambulance."

"Surely little sister" grinned Sergi, ivory teeth flashing across his tartar face. "I believe you are right."

So saying and with her in the cradle of his arm he forced his way through the madhouse. If any dared protest his hoarding of the girl, they thought better when they remembered Sergi's evil temper and the powers of his horse. Besides, their turn would come on the hysterical nurses who moved feebly beneath the lunging cossacks. They reached the outskirts of the area, tripping over tent ropes and coupling bodies as they went.

Sergi whistled and his horse appeared. Its grey body rippled and black stockinged feet lifted daintily as it trotted towards

him. Its head was lowered, the red eyes gleaming balefully. It looked as if it was really going to show signs of the vourdalak today. It halted, snorting, a few yards away, and seemed to study the dark-eyed wench in Sergi's arms. Her headdress had come off and her swarthy face was framed by shining raven hair. For a moment, girl and demon-horse seemed to contemplate each other. The girl turned back the nag's malevolent red stare with an omnipotent intensity. Crimson eyes met liquid black ones. After a time the horse tossed his head as if nodding sagely and came to stand by its master.

The cossack did not notice the exchange, being too busy chewing what he supposed was amorously, on the girl's shoulder and ripping her blouse off. The tough cotton parted only with the greatest reluctance. The alcohol clouded his brain, his only awareness was of a painful, all-consuming desire.

"I suppose you must be a real devil with the cossack girls in your stanitsa captain," she was saying, her soft hands moving teasingly over him. Her full lips pursed sultrily.

The cossack flushed with pride and bared his teeth in his most disarming smile. "Not 'captain' devotchka. Comrade...Comrade Sergi." His eyes narrowed. "In truth, the girls do find me quite dashing."

Sergi winked in drunken conspiracy. He squeezed the girl's firm breast and pressed his wet, bearded lips against her moist mouth. Her kiss seemed to suck the very soul from his big body and his head swam dizzily. The ground swayed like it did for a moujik on a Saturday night.

The girl slipped from his grasp and ran lightly away, her laughter ringing mockingly. She turned after a few steps, cupping her naked breasts and pointing them at Sergi. Her bodice hung about her waist like petals stripped from a flower.

"Come, brother cossack. Or can't you catch me?"

Sergi stared at the dark nipples. A burning need flowed through his body. The horse whinnied derisively. Cursing the animal, he stumbled

swiftly toward the girl, his sabre clanking against his thigh. Just as his hand closed on the torn cloth of her uniform, she twisted deftly away. Sergi was left clutching a piece of cotton. She ran easily and gracefully as a greyhound.

So it went, the girl dancing tauntingly away just as the cossack's hands were about to close on her. Maddened, he stumbled on, cursing her and his wobbly feet. His horse trotted behind him with what Sergi imagined to be an evilly amused look on its countenance.

After his first burst of exertion, he found himself out on the lonely steppe. He took a bottle of brandy out of his greatcoat and bit the cork out with his teeth. The brandy gurgled down his throat, stoking the fires within. He was hot, very hot, both with the brandy in his belly and the fire in his loins. Sweat beaded his brow and he shivered when the cold breeze blew across the steppe. He tore at the buttons of his greatcoat and tunic. He took another pull of brandy. He watched the girl through narrowed eyes.

She laughed and approached Sergi, arms outstretched invitingly. She meant to leap away when the cossack grabbed for her, but she had not counted on his wolf-like reflexes. Sergi almost caught her.

As it was, she left her skirt in Sergi's paws and he fell heavily, his sword tangled between his legs. She slipped away, breasts bouncing and lithe legs flashing, clad only in her linen underskirt. Sergi glanced at the darkening sky, then crawled to his feet and resumed his pursuit. She was leading him farther and farther out onto the steppe. He caught her once, but she bewitched him with her haunting dark eyes. She was naked now, the torn linen lying like a patch of snow on the brown grass.

So ended Sergi Starnakov's first day of revolution.

"I TRUST you are better at the kill than on the hunt, Comrade Sergi." A low sultry voice called across voids of blackness, cutting through

the horrible pounding like a razor. Sergi's consciousness tried to surface through thick waves of mist like a diver who has lingered too long beneath water. It was rough going, but no matter how much liquor he has consumed, a man who has spent four years in the trenches and fought the Japanese awakens quickly or dies. Sergi's eyes fluttered open. His horse was staring him full in the face, its fetid breath steaming from its nostrils. It had that look that Sergi had seen too often. The brute seemed to be debating on whether or not it should take a good bite from Sergi's neck. Sergi pushed its head away, the horse's eyes reflecting the silver cross on Sergi's ring.

The sky was heavy and grey. Sergi stared at it a moment before he remembered to seek the owner of the voice he'd heard. He rolled over and forced himself to his knees. Sitting in a peasant cart, holding the reins of the spavined nag in the traces, was the girl of the night before. A red kerchief bound her hair and framed her dark, handsome face. He could just see the cleavage of her breasts as they pushed against the low-cut peasant blouse she wore.

"Whore," coughed Sergi, his mouth filled with bitter ashes. "Leaving me out to sleep on the steppe alone. You little slut. I ought to flay the hide off that insolent body of yours."

He drew the nagaika, the weighted cossack whip, from his belt.

"I'm sorry," she said, dropping her eyes demurely, the long dark lashes fluttering. "I was frightened. You were drunk. Won't you come up and ride with me?"

The dark eyes caused a want in Sergi's belly that spread up to his throat and down to his loins. She arched forward like a cat, the fabric of the blouse swelled, her full lips parted.

Sergi climbed up onto the cart.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, indicating the cart.

"Some friends of mine passed on to their reward" she said evasively, tossing her head.

The cossack took the traces

from the girl's hand and flicked them over the nag's mangy back. His own horse trotted beside them, placing its feet fussily like a cat. He regarded the girl from the corner of his eye. Now in the day, he could fully appreciate her beauty. She had a dark, gypsy sort of complexion. Her body was voluptuous, to a certain Borzoi-like svelteness. Her teeth were like tiny pearls. Her lips - Sergi thought of taking her right then.

"Tonight, comrade," she said, as if reading his thoughts. She pressed her body into his side. Sergi swallowed hard.

"You have a name?" he said gruffly.

"Zulieka" she said, staring into his face.

"It's a name."

So they rode the day, Sergi never thinking to ask their destination. The steppe rolled to the horizon on all sides. They talked little, and at dusk they pulled to the side of the muddy road and built a fire. Zulieka cooked some food and produced a bottle of vodka. They ate and drank. After a time, she rose and beckoned him with her eyes. Before long, their clothes were on the floor of the cart and she was keeping her promise with a vengeance.

The next day Sergi rose, red welts crisscrossed his back and red crescents scarred his shoulders. She was like some clawing jungle beast and he felt as if he had been despoiled, not her. They spent the next day in aimless travel and the night in violent lovemaking. So it went for a week, each day the same, a brown steppe beneath a grey sky and each night with Zulieka beneath the cossack. He'd seen neither sun nor moon for a fortnight.

On the morning of the ninth day, Zulieka began acting strangely. Her movements became more and more furtive and fluid. She was like a caged wild beast. Every now and then when she thought Sergi was not looking he swore he saw her lick her chops like an animal.

That night as soon as she had finished putting away the supper things, she turned to Sergi who was sharpening his sabre and said,

"Come my little Cossack, come to your Zulieka." Her teeth flashed. Sergi looked up. She was shrugging the blouse over her head and tossing it aside. The firelight danced on her round breasts and smooth lean belly.

"Does Sergi like Zulieka?" she growled. The skirt dropped around her ankles.

"Da," said the cossack, staring at her tapering legs. He stuck the sabre in the ground. "Sergi likes Zulieka - the little harlot."

The cossack grabbed her and she drew him down on the sleeping furs beside the cart. In a moment they were coupling madly, the firelight playing on their bodies. The clouds scudded overhead.

By the time they had finished the particularly stormy session, the embers had burned low. Zulieka lay nestled in the crook of Sergi's arm. The cossack stared at the sky, fully sated. It was beginning to clear some. The cloud divisions were marching east. Suddenly the steppe was bathed in a silver glow. A round disc appeared between the

clouds. Sergi absently noted the full moon. Zulieka stirred at his side. She pressed her soft, raven hair against his arm.

Sergi felt sleep overtaking him as he stared at the luminescent orb. Zulieka growled throatily, almost like she did in the throes of passion. "What, you want more, steppe flower?" he murmured, turning toward her.

A sleek, black snout with white, pointed fangs regarded Sergi from the crook of his arm. Continuing along the curve of his body were the four legs and deep chest of a wolf, all covered with sleek black fur. The bushy tail flicked a warning.

Sergi rolled out of the blankets and to his feet, snatched up his sabre and ran out onto the steppe. The air was cold on his naked body though the goosebumps were more probably from fright than chill. It was not his wont to lay down with a wolf. What had happened to Zulieka?

This and more did Sergi ponder as he sprinted along, a snarling mass



"Pointed fangs regarded Sergi from the crook of his arm."

of teeth and fur at his heels.

Where the hell was that damned horse when he needed him? Just as he thought that, his naked foot came down hard on a sharp rock. He yelled in agony as he went sprawling into the dew-laden grass. He squirmed onto his back, holding the sword between him and the wolf.

The animal circled slowly, stiff-legged, with the ears laid back. A low growl rumbled from its throat though its soft, dark eyes betrayed no hint of malevolency. In fact, they looked like Zulieka's eyes. They had the same wild softness. The form in front of him seemed to shimmer. The outlines, save for the eyes, changed and reformed.

"Did I frighten the brave cossack?" came a familiar, throaty voice. Before him stood Zulieka, the moonlight silver on her naked curves. Again, a low, husky growl.

Sergi climbed to his feet, the sword dangling loosely in his hand. He was beginning to comprehend.

"Startled a bit, perhaps, wench. Just what sort of witchery is this?"

"My children are hungry comrade," she whispered, "they need a strong man's heart, just as I needed a strong man's seed. Look!"

Two dark shadows glided over the steppe and came to rest at her legs. Sergi saw them to be wolves, large, powerful brutes with white fangs and red, lolling tongues. Except for the eyes, they were the counterpart of the beast that had chased him scant moments before.

"What does all this mean?" said Sergi, measuring the brutes against his sabre. "Why did you lure me out here?"

"My family must grow if we are to survive and remain strong through these troubled times. Things are changing cossack, even you must sense that. The Bolsheviks - and they shall out, mark you - are not a very superstitious lot and they will not give our folk the wide berth the Czar's starets did."

"What do you mean, 'Our Folk'?" said Sergi uncertainly, the hairs prickling on the back of his neck. Where was that damn horse?

"Why, the Wolf-folk!" she laughed, her smile not at all pleasant.

"Were-wolves, if you will."

Sergi nodded. He had seen enough strange things, his vampire horse least of all, to believe anything.

"And these," he waved his sword questioningly at the two black brutes at her side.

"My children!" She laughed again, running her fingers through the scruff of thick fur around their necks. "The father was but a timber wolf I lay with once. They have little of my blood in them."

"You have lain with a wolf, a beast?" Sergi demanded.

"I've lain with you, haven't I? I was in the form of a wolf when I did though. Just as I was a woman when you planted in me."

"What sort of abomination will you hear?" he cried.

"Werewolves like myself, and we shall gorge full from this realm of blood just as my children shall of your carcass. You ignorant cossack, did you think it was because of your ugly features that I led you out on the steppe, away from the haunts of man?"

Sergi answered by lashing out with his sabre. The wolf on his left crumpled, its head hanging from a shred of flesh as its black blood pumped out onto the steppe. The vicious hackhand that flashed, meaning to cut Zulieka's legs out from beneath her, missed as she leaped nimbly away, a look of surprise and horror on her face. Instead, the stroke caught the other wolf ready to spring. Sergi could hear the ribs crunch as it bit into the brute's side. It howled in agony, a cry that ended abruptly as Sergi's sabre split its skull. It happened incredibly fast, a person blinking twice would have missed each flash of the sabre.

Zulieka had staggered back a half-dozen steps, her hands pressed to her face, not believing the cossack's sword play.

Sergi could have leaped in and cut her down, he thought, but he was not sure of her full powers, so he resisted the impulse. He remembered to whistle for his horse, loud and insistent.

"My sons will be more powerful

"Sergi steeled himself to meet the hurtling body when it sprang."



than I had thought," gasped Zulieka, just recovering herself.

"Their sire is truly a man of consequence. I think I shall eat your heart and have your strength flow into me." She took a step toward him. Sergi took a step back. Her form wavered, darkened, crouched. Sergi blinked his eyes. A wolf, teeth bared, crouched low to the ground, ready to spring. It crawled forward a few feet, tail lashing furiously.

Sergi steeled himself to meet the hurtling body when it sprang. Damn, why was it waiting? He tried to take a better grip on the sweat-slippery hilt of his sabre. The blood thundered in his ears. He saw the lean black body coil. The black eyes met his, so strange for a wolf. Then it came.

The beast, Zulieka, surged forward. Sergi saw a nightmare vision of red mouth and white fangs. Something crashed into his back, throw him to the ground, the air bursting from his lungs with a groan. For a moment he lay stunned, his face pressed against the black earth of the steppe. Above him the sound of a battle raged, then abruptly stopped with a dying gurgle.

Mumbling many thanks to God, Sergi attempted to crawl to his feet, sucking painful bursts of air into his shrivled lungs. Picking up his sabre, he looked vaguely around from his crippling, doubled-up posture. The demon-horse was straddling the corpse of a wolf, contentedly sucking the blood into its gory maw. A few feet away, a wolf with black eyes lay on its back, legs thrust into the sky, blood oozing from its torn throat.

The horse and he exchanged a glance. Years ago, a starets had prophesied that the horse and none other would be his doom. Well, it wasn't time yet. He turned to Zulieka's wolf-corpse.

"You were a beautiful girl, Zulieka, and as a wolf you have very pretty fur." His naked hide shivered as he bent over the corpse.

Years later, in an Arctic circle labour camp, a red guard traded an extra bowl of gruel for the tobacco pouch of a prisoner. A day later, perhaps strengthened by the gruel, the cossack escaped and the guard was left with the pouch. It was a beautiful pouch, of the softest fur, almost like a girl's hair.

Queen Berúthiel is mentioned in Book One of *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien elaborated on her in an interview in *New Worlds*, saying that she used the cats to spy on people and also tortured them for fun...



Berúthiel

By PAT McINTOSH

IN HER mantle of gold Berúthiel
 Climbs the stairs that the cats know well.
 The room at the top of the curling stair
 Is filled with cages of silver wire;
 In each a cat with eyes of fire
 Watches the queen with a baleful glare.
 About her, as over the sill she leans,
 Are sharp-edged weapons and strange machines.
 Eyes of grey has Berúthiel,
 Eyes of sharp and steely grey;
 Her darkling hair she has hid by day
 Under linen coif, under jewelled crown,
 But it lies at night when she lets it fall
 Along her back like the night's own pall,
 And glimmers a little, as by starlight.
 Her narrow lips are as bloody-bright
 As the petalled mouth of a venomous flower,
 And her steel-grey eyes have a shadowed frown
 As she watches her town from its topmost tower.

On a chain about her wimpled throat,
 Set in gold, is a cat's-eye stone,
 With shifting bands of gold and brown
 And words of power she knows by rote.
 Wielding the stone, Berúthiel
 Can order the cats as it takes her whim;
 Can make them dance to a silent hymn,
 Clumsily leaping on booted paws,
 Fight like fiends for a trivial cause,
 Fight to the death when she wills it so,
 And when she wills it, silently go
 Into the jaws of the strange machines
 Whose knives and needles and silver screens
 Reflect her face; when their work is done
 Blood in the lamplight oozes jet.
 And bloodier entertainments yet
 Will the cats provide Berúthiel.

But after the curfew bell has tolled,
Berúthiel in her cloak of gold
Stands at the head of the tower stair,
And the cats go past her, round and down
Into the quiet, lamplit town,
Driven by words they know by rote
And the stone that hangs by her long white throat.
Drifting silent from shadow to shade,
Grey in the dark like ghosts unlaid,
The cats go listening here and there,
Gathering thoughts for Berúthiel.
And whatever they hear of treasoned plan,
Of secret whisper or mind of man
Spoken aloud in an inner room,
The cats remember and carry home.

But when fires of lamp and hearth are dead,
And the last of the townsfolk safe in bed,
With feline purpose, the silent feet
Go hither and yon in the sleeping street
While the moon climbs over the starry sky,
Relentlessly, pursuing their own
Disciplined search for a single stone
As coldly grey as the queen's grey eye.

Before the dawn, in the darker gloom
That hangs within the tower room,
Berúthiel in her carven chair
Sits at the head of the curling stair
Stroking the stone, and one by one
The cats come up from the dawn-dark town.
Black and tabby and grey and white,
Padding silently into the light,
Reluctantly answer the silent call.
They make obeisance, sitting tall,
And golden eye to steely grey,
With tail wrapped decorous round the feet,
One at a time before her seat
They tell what the townsfolk have to say.
And now and again she reaches down,
With a shudder she cannot quite control,
Her long white hand to a furry crown,
The better to read a feline soul.

But this they have hid from Berúthiel:
Whatever she learns of treasoned plan,
Of secret whisper or mind of man,
Whatever the cats will do for fear
Of the stone the queen must always wear,
With little but hatred in return,
There is yet one thing she cannot learn:
The fact engraved in every mind,
That what they seek they will one day find,
That one specific steel-grey stone,
With words of power to learn by rote,
Words that fit in a feline throat,
Never meant for the tongues of men.

And bloody the entertainment then
The cats will find in Berúthiel.

Andrew Darlington has been a prolific writer of stories, reviews and articles, his work appearing in over 500 publications to date, both professional and amateur, all over the world. His work has been translated into German, Spanish and Belgian and he has also seen publication in Japan, South Africa, Sweden, Denmark and Alaska. Jazz and Rock criticism have been published in the UK (*Impetus*, *Liquorice*, *It*) and in the USA (*New Haven Rock Press*, *Gargoyle*). Andrews's poetry collections include, *Deaf Eyes*, *Positive/Negative*, *Owls and Swimmers*, *Full Frontal Jazz* and the forthcoming *Slits in Aerosol Green*. His science fiction stories have been published in *Stopwatch* (NEL), *Science Fiction Monthly* (sold to, but not published) and in various semi-professional magazines, including *Space and Time* and the British Fantasy Society's *Dark Horizons* among others. He is currently working on a science fiction novel entitled *In the Time of the Breaking*. The story we include here, a science fantasy, is part of a story cycle called 'The Ultimate Hunger', for which Andy is seeking book publication.

The Last Sleeping God of Mars

By ANDREW DARLINGTON

Illustration by ALAN HUNTER

THE twilight screamed nightmare faces at them. The distorted faces of mythical wolves tearing at the men from the haunted shadows. Overhead the pale crescent of Diemos eked lethargic light over the wind-torn plane, the arid wastes of rocky hills and sparsely vegetated crater valleys that lay ahead of them. Frost and light snow sparkled and glistened across screes of loose shingle and desolate patches of spindly tundra.

Grenaman Taad stumbled and cursed fluently in several dialects. He disliked Mars. From the outset of the mission he had been unsure of its wisdom. Then there was movement to his right. Taad noted the variation in shadow infestation, saw the beastmen materialise from the angles of darkness, the wolf-features twisted and feral, the baleful howls that punctuated the stillness. Even as the beastmen leapt spears arched to meet them. The small group of Presidium Guards formed a protective circle of flashing steel around their prisoner, and met the grotesque attackers with courage bred of des-

peration. Taad's arms were pinioned and bound behind him as his captors met the new attack. Swords glinted in the leprous Diemos-light, swung in arcs of loathing and hatred at the wolf-featured beastmen. Again and again they had materialised from darkness, to be impaled and destroyed, only to reappear to renew the intermittent warfare of the eternal Martian night.

Long, tense moments later War Chao sheathed his sword. The wolfmen were gone, dispersed as magically as they had come. But he knew that they would return. Chao urged his dispirited troop, six of Chlor-el Et Snaar's Presidium Guard, and their prisoner, the rebel Grenaman Taad, into the cover of the crater-valley beyond. Shadows shifted and surged like veils of forgetfulness about them as they descended the shingle incline into the freezing, ice-infested valley beyond. The gaunt shapes of brittle ferns and wispy tundra grasses moved in the night-wind as the column of men advanced across the valley floor. They held swords loosely before

"Taad thrust upwards with the prayer-blade as the beastman hesitated."



them, prepared for a further attack.

War Chao attempted to pierce the night, to see beyond the furious shadows. He had lost half his men in sudden raids from supernatural assailants. The losses he regretted, but accepted the deaths as the inevitable and necessary cost that had to be paid. To snare Grenaman Taad and drag him in chains to the imperial cities of Chlorel Et Snaar he would gladly have sacrificed legions, but to loose his prisoner to the mysterious beastmen at the last moment of victory was a prospect he would not contemplate. Chao's eyes registered the presence of ruins embedded in the valley wall ahead of them. The colonnaded facade of an ancient Temple. Chao led the way towards its ill-kempt entrance. There was rubble and smashed masonry across the valley floor from the recent devastating Mars-quake, and the troop picked their way between shattered monoliths of horrific gods to reach the wide, igneous stairs that led

the way to the Temple. The night hissed and whispered around them, but there was no further attack as the weary men reached the crest of the worn time-eroded steps. Behind the columns, and the monoliths beyond, the interior of the Temple led into the very wall of the ancient valley.

Chao glanced around the darkness of the Temple, the ancient frescos and the debris strewn floor. The place was defensible. It would suffice to survive the hours of night.

"WHAT do you know of these beastmen, Taad?" accused Chao as the light of a guttering fire painted dancing shadows around the portal of the ruined Temple.

The rebel shrugged. "I know no more than you."

"But it was your mission that brought us to this Thal-forsaken part of the world."

Taad thought quickly of the corrupt ant-hill cities of the interior, ruled for three centuries by the evil Chlorel Et Snaar. The regime that he, and a number of

other small groups of rebels had sworn to destroy, and fought against for most of their lives. Now, at last, the vile despot was dying, and the cities were being torn apart by internecine strife. Grenaman Taad and his group, returning from Ozymandias, the strange world of translucent grass and giant insects, had crossed thousands of miles of arid Martian deserts in air-ships to meet, and forge an alliance with Artanis, leader of another rebel group. Going ahead alone Taad had discovered that the city designated as the point of rendezvous was devastated and in ruins following a series of violent Mars-quakes. Then, incidents happened in rapid succession. The hated Presidium Guard of Chlorel Et Snaar had swooped from the skies, had pursued Taad in a running battle through the ruined city and the plain beyond, until they had made the rebel leader their prisoner. It had been then, as night had fallen and the Guard, led by War Chao, had attempted to lead their prisoner back to their tethered air-ships in the deserted city that the hostile beastmen had begun to materialise from the darkness and besiege the men.

Taad glanced across to the doggedly determined leader of the Presidium Guard. "I have dedicated my life to fighting more tangible evils. That of Chlorel Et Snaar."

"Your taunts cannot antagonise me, rebel," he responded. "Whatever the flaws of the regime, it represents order. You represent a threat to that order. You must be eliminated."

"Is an eternally stable but evil order better than the promise of freedom, however hard won?"

"We are not here to construct dialogue. We are here to survive." War Chao stood up brandishing a torch from the fire. The light illuminated the hall of the Temple. Behind him lay a complex of carved gods and obelisks partially concealing intricately carved corridors leading into the wall of rock beyond. In the other direction past the lightly-armoured

guards, stood the ancient portal pillars, and beyond that the haunted Martian night.

"You know what kind of building this is?" stabbed Chao.

Taad smiled. "It is a Temple to the Elder Gods. We are both men of learning War Chao, we both know the history of the Elder Gods and the sects dedicated to preserving the defences against their return."

Before they could go further there was a blood-curdling shriek that ripped at the night, caught and reverberated within the high-roofed Temple. Then the beastmen came in waves from the shadows of the dark valley beyond. War Chao drew his blade and held it loosely at Grenaman Taad's chest while his remaining men formed a determined line along the columns, swords and spears forming a dense barrier against the inhuman attackers. The beastmen clawed and slavered with bestial cries, thrusting and grasping at the men. Swords flashed, gleaming crimson with blood, but the beastmen came on undeterred by casualty.

"Free me, for Thal's sake, you need an extra sword," breathed Taad.

"Free you? Before we are overwhelmed I shall kill you myself."

"I have no time for mindless heroics, and have no intention of dying. You are fighting unnatural opponents, you will need more than mere steel to survive."

With a metallic crash and howls of delight the beastmen broke through. Chlorel Et Snaar's men fell back, War Chao whirled his blade, impaling a feral attacker full in the chest. The naked shaggy beastman splayed across the Temple floor. The fighting grew more intense as the determined knot of humans retreated inwards into the bowels of the Temple, they were vastly outnumbered. Grenaman Taad crouched, as War Chao raised his bloodied sword above the prisoner, and brought the blade down in a vicious arc.

For a moment the rebel cringed before the impending blow, but the weapon merely severed his bonds. Free, he stood up, side-kicking at the remnants of the

fire. Ash and smouldering timber sprayed in a brilliant arc at the attackers, who fell back momentarily startled. Taad seized a blazing brand with his free hand and moved rapidly backwards into the shadow-infested network of statues and monoliths behind them.

Then there was a beastman before him. Without breaking his stride Taad leapt, thrust the torch before him into the bestial face, and impacted a second later. The flame burst and exploded with the creature's animal cries. Taad rolled and braced himself against a shattered statue, his fingers clawing for purchase, seizing at debris, then he brought a piece of shattered stone down on the beast again and again. War Chao and his two remaining soldiers broke from the fray and retreated into the tangle of shadows where Taad was scrambling to his feet, clutching a prayer-blade he had seized from the dead beastman. Strangely the rest of the attackers hesitated over the fallen warriors while the men made their escape into the carved warrens of ancient stone that lay behind the belt of stone gods.

Chao wiped perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Taad," he said softly, "I freed you for the moment, because we need an extra blade, and because we possess a common humanity against supernatural assailants. But when this is all over you remain my prisoner. Understand?"

Taad smiled in the flickering torch-light. He examined the ancient prayer-blade that he had taken from the dead beastman as he led the way down the sloping corridor. There was a strange sub-human howling from the Temple that echoed and whined down the cold walls of stone as they moved deeper into the catacombs beneath the arid crater-valleys of Mars. The sound of shingle mocked at them beneath their foot-falls. No longer were the walls artificial, but seemed to have linked into a network of natural tunnels and labyrinths that had existed since the world's primeval youth. There were occasional ruptures in the

walls and ceiling, and piles of obstructing rubble from the recent destructive quake.

The corridor opened out into a wide stalagmite-strewn gallery, with a faint eerie glow seeping from the roof. The flame spluttered sullenly as the remaining warriors made their way along the grotto's length in silence. There was a strangely unnatural whispering that surged about the inter-linked catacombs like the breathing of the huge sleeping gods of antiquity.

"There are stories -" began War Chao.

"The cult of the Old Ones, the Elder Gods, goes back thousands of years," said Taad, feinting absently at shadows with the ancient prayer-blade. "It dates back to the time when all of the human worlds were devastated by the supernatural wars. There was no victory. It is believed that the Old Ones merely tired of the play, and went away to seek new toys."

"You don't believe that?"

"It is easy to believe anything down here," he smiled cynically, sheathing the blade.

Almost as suddenly the huge gallery ended, and was replaced by a small steeply slanting well, beyond which there appeared to be light.

"We can't go back, the beastmen haunt the Temple," reasoned Chao. "There is a vague chance that we can find another exit beyond here. Some way of getting back to the cities."

"Your obsessions are becoming monotonous," retorted Taad. "I appreciate your desire to drag me to Chlorel Et Snaar's court in chains but..."

"But you fear the beastmen?"

"I believe that the presence of the beastmen ties in with the existence of this Temple. Have you noticed that they do not appear to be following us? They are poring over the dead and injured. They are dragging away the unconscious and maimed bodies of your troop Chao. And there is something that I almost hesitate to mention. But one of those beasts back in the Temple bore the strangest resem-

blance, beneath the hair and the wolfishness, to... Artanis."

"Artanis the rebel? You are mad." War Chao slid down the narrow well, followed by Taad and the two remaining soldiers of the Presidium Guard. They exploded into a vortex of light. A beastman whirled, Chao's blade unsheathed like a reflex action, it bit deep into skin, tissue and blood, splitting the wolfish half-human face in two. The beast slumped without a sound, and the swordsman crouched awaiting the second attacker that never materialised.

The four men had emerged onto a gallery overlooking a huge flame-illuminated grotto. Beneath them were almost a thousand beastmen in attitudes of homage to an immense basalt god carved from the very walls of the labyrinth itself. The ceiling and the cruelly carved skull-features were painted by flickering blood-red shadows, and there was sparse ghost-white, spindle-limbed vegetation growing along its floor.

War Chao moved forward, until Taad restrained him. "Watch. This is some kind of ceremony. I don't believe that our arrival here was accidental. Seems to me that the attacks throughout the night guided us into the Temple, and hence to this strange place. And look, they have got your men down there. Seems to me that the beastmen are recruiting, and that your Presidium Guard, and by inference - us - are next on their list."

The unconscious troop of Chlor-el Et Snaar's guard, dragged from the aftermath of the battle in the Temple, lay prostrate and riddled by angry shadows within an immense circle of wolf-men. They faced the cruel and barbaric carved god.

"This labyrinth is part of the Temple," continued Grenaman Taad. "By the look of it, it has been in continual use until very recently. I would hazard a guess that it has been in use - by human beings - at least until the quake."

Beneath them, the wolf-men were howling and baying in a bizarre and repulsive ritual around the inert Presidium Guard. Masked and paint-daubed beastmen emerged from

beneath the immense fascade of the skull-god and began prancing grotesquely around the human prisoners. In the meantime Grenaman Taad moved around the gallery along the periphery of the huge labyrinth, veiled in the shifting shadows and the baying that congealed and silted the air with menace. The gallery ran abreast of the carved visage of the primal god, its empty eye-sockets staring expressionlessly.

"You sense it..."

"I sense nothing, said War Chao curtly.

"I sense the Old Ones, the quake, the emergence of the beastmen."

The gallery ended in a fall of rock from the quake. Beyond a hundred yards of ragged edifice lay the empty eye-socket of the skull-like carved god.

"You know what this is?" Said Taad brandishing the blade he had retrieved from the dead beastman in the Temple.

"It is only a prayer-blade. They are common enough to be unexceptional, particularly in a Temple."

"The devotees of the cult of Elder Gods use prayer-blades in their dawn-rituals to focus mental energies. The beast must have found the blade in the Temple, and used it merely as a convenient weapon of the moment with which to attack me. Yet all over the complex of human cities there are priest and devotee cells who focus energies into these things."

"To create psychic barriers to deter the return of the Old Ones."

"Perhaps. The origin of the cult is so lost in antiquity that probably even the priests would not agree on the exact function of the rituals. But it could be that the energies are channelled into a very finite point. That those energies focus somewhere here for a very tangible purpose." As he spoke Taad swung out over the vertiginous drop, fingers questing for purchase on the rough, eroded face of the god. War Chao indicated that the two remaining members of the Presidium Guard should stay concealed

on the gallery and protect the rear from attack, then he followed his Pirate-Rebel prisoner. The two men were silent, but for their heavy breathing, and the sound of the sharp rasping of fingers clawing for hand-holes as they moved across the near-vertical face of monolithic rock.

For a moment Grenaman Taad hung suspended over the sheer drop, his eyes closed in concentration. Within his sweat-damp grimed clothes he felt suddenly weak and weary, inadequate for the task he had set himself. Somewhere miles above them he visualised the Martian night bleak and silvered by Diemos-light, moving coldly and aridly towards the dawn that still lay hours ahead. The dawn that, all over the world's human cities, would be heralded by the rituals conducted by the cult of the Elder Gods. Even as the Pirate-Rebel relaxed the vision, he was aware of strangely disturbing sensations, like obscenely questing tentacles, flickering across the periphery of his conscious mind.

Then a spear shattered inches from Taad's face, he lurched and almost lost his footing, then used the precarious momentum to swing towards the skull-god's gaping eye-socket that was his destination still yards ahead of him. Within the darkness of the socket there were three beastmen. The rebel cannonned into them, and before he had time to regain balance he was clawing at the matted wolf-bodies. One of them shrieked and spun out into the nothingness beyond. Then Taad was slammed up against the wall of rock by the remaining creature's unnatural strength. At the same moment War Chao appeared from the shadows behind them, his blade swinging, biting deep. There was a sudden welter of blood mingled with unearthly animal cries.

Taad thrust upwards with the prayer-blade as the beastman hesitated, impacting into its ribcage. Leaving the stunned inert beasts the two men moved off down the sloping corridor of stone beyond the eye-socket. Into the brain cortex of the carved skull-

god. Below them the grotto was in flame, the army of wolf-men were howling and baying for blood. The corridor of stone was poorly lit, and there was slime underfoot. Once the immediate danger appeared to be past, and the floor beneath them began to slope more steeply downwards, the two men slowed to a walk to regain their lost breath. War Chao toyed with his sword nervously, while Grenaman Taad held the prayer-blade loosely before him. Moments lengthened, the walls of the corridor appeared to be fused by intense heat, to have run like liquid and re-solidified into surreal patterns, while the air vibrated as though charged with malevolent energy.

"We are about to reach the heart of evil," said Chao. "I begin to sense it, at the back of my mind."

"I have been aware of it for a number of hours, but it is growing more intense," said Taad. "I believe that at least one of the Old Ones, the last sleeping God of Mars, is here. Somewhere beneath us. I believe that the whole network of the cult of Elder Gods was designed to keep it ensnared in bonds of psychic energy, but that the quake destroyed or disrupted the system's final link. That it killed the priests who directed the energy, disrupted the system, partially freed the god enough for it to exert its malevolence upon those who remained in the area. First of all, perhaps, it influenced the remaining priests left in the quake-devastated Temple, who in turn kidnapped and induced the transformation of refugees from the derelict city. Then there must have been others, many others, including Artanis and his men. The beasts have provided the god with the legs it has been denied, they have given it mobility by becoming its puppets."

"But how does the transformation take place - men into beasts?"

The rebel shrugged. "Could be through the ingestion of those plants in the labyrinths which, in turn, have been genetically altered by the presence of the intense evil beneath them. Perhaps the re-

maining priests of the Temple were trapped underground by the quake and were forced by starvation to eat the stuff, and hence became the first of the Old Ones' beast-slaves."

As they walked the irritation in their minds grew, until it nagged like tooth-ache, while mild hallucinations welled up like a vile tide. They walked on in a silence splintered only by the occasional splash of an unseen water-source and the mocking echo of booted heels on cold stone. The air stood out about them silted with hostility and congealed evil.

"The beastmen seem impossible to destroy. Their evil must be severed at its source," recited War Chao almost mechanically.

Taad smiled cynically. "We must get closer yet. When the Temple functioned with its full complement of priests, perhaps twenty-four or more, they could trade such proximity for their numbers. We are two, so we must get as close to the god as possible before we can use the prayer-blade at the moment of the dawn-ritual, to channel the energies so that we can re-tomb, or even destroy it."

"Or before it destroys us..."

There was a bizarre sensation that the corridor was spinning, that, instead of remaining predominantly horizontal it had become a vertical shaft and that they were falling inexorably into the heart of darkness at the world's unseen core. Taad choked back a cry. They remained suspended irrationally over an eternity of void as the world righted itself. Then the walls shimmered, rippled and flowed like tide, like molten stone surging and melting around them to swallow, asphixiate and destroy them. Yet they walked on through it all determindly. Pebbles and stones shifted, hurled themselves from the floor at the men, striking at exposed areas of flesh, drawing blood.

Grenaman Taad seized the prayer-blade until he imagined that he must leave his imprint upon its haft, as nightmare shapes and forms detached themselves from the walls and ceiling to scream, jab-

bering insanity at him. War Chao was gone, unconscious or dead, and he was alone. Forcing his mind away to the cool and tactile Martian night miles above him, the movement of the heavens that would soon bring dawn-light spilling haphazardly over the tortured and war-torn cities of Mars, the rodent and refugee members of the cult of the Elder Gods who, in scorned secrecy would be meeting to pour their energies into prayer-blades in dawn-rituals.

Time twisted and vortexed like hydra-headed lizards, Taad fell backwards and fell for an eternity of elongated moments, yet stayed erect and walked, each step taking a year, each heart-beat a century, each dull thud of blood through his veins echoing and pounding emptily through frigid galaxies of nothingness. Each thought dripped and was excreted like icy rain to solidify and freeze in entombed, crystalized letters etched across the heart of suns. Cock-roaches crawled from the pores on the back of his hand, reptiles erupted and squirmed from his perspiration ducts, his lungs and bowels were riddled with scorpions stripping gleaming rotting flesh from pure-white cadavers.

He was screaming but there was no sound.

The universe contracted and reeled, imploding into blackness, there was no body, there was no mind, no breath or sound or feeling, there was the prayer-blade and nothing else. Grenaman Taad continued to walk into the very presence of evil, into the heart of the Old One, the last sleeping god of Mars.

His eyes were closed, his body torn and wracked with pain. At the moment of recognition he knew that he had lost, knew his own feebleness, his bestiality, his total transient insignificance. He died and was reborn a thousand times and remained nothing but the most fleeting thought. The god was eternal. It tossed and battered him as less than a toy, destroyed him, turned him inside out, stripped the flesh from his body inch by inch.

The Elder God filled the universe and was vile, was every nightmare, every bestial incarnation of insanity. Grenaman Taad died of pure terror.

A second later dawn hit the cold cities of Mars, spilling over crenellations of ochre stone and time-eroded fortresses.

A second later the prayer-blade exploded into a thousand shimmering constellations of pure lethal energy.

GRENAMAN Taad left the brain of the carved skull-god. He felt weary, drained of energy, but intact and unhurt. Down the corridor

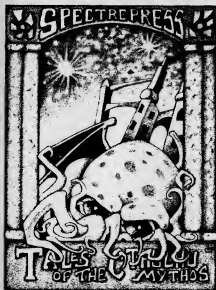
he came upon the sleeping, exhausted form of War Chao, and carried the leader of the Presidium Guard to the labyrinth where together they had witnessed the evil rituals of the beastmen.

The plants had withered and died, drained away into the rock like so much slime. The labyrinth was filled with sleeping men who had been beasts.

Grenaman Taad left War Chao and followed the twisting corridors of rock out into the dull Martian plain where his Air-ship hung waiting on the horizon. The craft was turned crimson by dawn-light.

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Denys Val Baker is the founder and editor of the original *Little Reviews Anthology* (1942-1948) and subsequently editor of numerous anthologies of short stories and also magazines. This includes a recent series for William Kimber publishers, *Stories of the Night*, *Stories of the Macabre*, and *Stories of Suspense*. He has written a series of autobiographical accounts of life with a large family in Cornwall, and in all has authored over forty books. His novels include, *A Company of Three*, *As the River Flows*, *Don't Lose Your Cool*, *Dad* and *The White Rock*. Short story collections include, *Worlds Without End*, *A Summer to Remember* and *The Secret Place*. Mr. Baker's collection of macabre stories, *The Face in the Mirror*, was published by Arkham House in 1971 and the tale we feature here is from that collection, a hauntingly erotic ghost story called...

The Inheritance

By DENYS VAL
BAKER

Illustration by DAVID LLOYD

THE girl Elly was twenty one years old when her grandmother's will came into effect and she became the rightful owner of the big, bleak granite house out on Bodmin Moor. It was a moment she had been secretly preparing for ever since she had first heard of the bequest from her puzzled, already estranged parents. They could not understand, or forgive the temerity of an eccentric old lady in by-passing a whole generation in the bestowing of such a formidable favour.

"That's what comes of buttering up the old girl, I suppose," said Elly's mother sourly. "By rights it should go to your father."

But Elly knew that her father, a weak and self-centred man, had cared little about his aged mother and had done nothing to deserve such an inheritance...and as for her own relationship with the old lady it had been born of no unworthy or ulterior motive but rather out of a spontaneous bond of sympathy. She had never forgotten the occasion of her first visit, when her parents had responded to an invitation by making excuses ("Bleak forlorn place, no thank you," her mother had mutter-



"Often the girl Elly would remain for endless periods in front of her mirror."

ed) and sending her down as if in compensation. While the ancient lumbering taxi from Bodmin Road Station had made that first haunting journey through winding narrow lanes, often across wide desolate areas of moorland where the only signs of life would be a lonely cluster of black bullocks, Elly had found herself growing increasingly nervous. Looking back she could see that anyone might well have been apprehensive about such an apparent journey into nowhere, especially one culminating in the arrival at such an enormous, lonely, even sad looking house. And yet the moment she stepped out and took in the unfamiliar, almost eerie sight, she felt immediately a sense of peace, even contentment. When the huge oak doors opened and she recognized the frail white-haired figure of her grandmother she felt that they were joined together at once by some kind of elemental link. After that she had never minded the long journey from London, had grown to treasure the strange, rather secretive periods with her grandmother, just the two of them wandering in the afternoons across the wild moors, or sitting in the evenings by the big log fire in the long sitting room from whose bay window, on a clear day, you could catch a distant glimpse of the grey Atlantic Ocean. It was at these times, listening entranced to the reed-like voice of the old lady recalling dim memories of the lonely life of the moors, that Elly had become aware of the significance in her life of that remote, mysterious place. She had never openly expressed this feeling to her grandmother, she felt sure - and yet somehow, when the solicitor's letter arrived one day like a proverbial missile out of the blue, the generous bequest did not seem altogether a surprise. Instead, it bore the touch of the inevitable... All her rather solitary, curiously unfulfilled life, she realized with a throb of excitement, might have been merely a preparation for such an inheritance.

It was the beginnings of a Cornish spring when the business of

clearing up her previous life was completed and she was able at last to make the long journey westwards. For some years she had lived on her own, inhabiting one dreary bed sitting room after another on the fringes of Earls Court and South Kensington, Fulham and King's Road, participating superficially in the life of her own lost generation by wearing black leather jackets, sweaters and jeans and high-heeled boots, squatting for hours listening to cool jazz in smoky cellars, drinking when the occasion demanded... working now and then, once as a waitress in a coffee bar, another time as an assistant in one of the big, anonymous departmental stores, a third time, more pleasurably, behind the colourfully lined shelves of a bookshop... never somehow becoming really involved with anyone else, remaining stubbornly a lone wolf, withdrawn into her secret self... and all the time a part of her already far away, across the miles of uniform, soul destroying roofs and chimneys, beyond the neat suburban parks, far out to where the wind blew eerily among the tiny Cornish hedges and fields, bending the few trees still obstinately clinging to their moorland roots.

When the time came to give all this up she did so gladly, without a qualm. It was as if when finally she settled down in a corner of the train at Paddington and watched the familiar environment sliding gently away, so she wiped clean the slate of the past in preparation for entering a new life, perhaps as a new person. By the time she stepped off the train at the lonely halt station, steeply and unexpectedly surrounded by high trees, perhaps already she was someone else, or perhaps this was more likely, the real Elly... this waif-like, pale-faced boyish figure, moving as if always alone, shoulders hunched up, dark hair dishevelled and brushed carelessly back, eyes peering eagerly forward into the imponderable mysterious future. She could hardly wait until the familiar taxi had driven up to the stone steps, the driver

had helped her out with her two suitcases, all her worldly possessions - and suddenly she was left alone.

NOTHING that Elly had imagined could compare with her experiences and sensations during the ensuing days as she took up her new life in the big, bleak old house. She had imagined a certain loneliness, a feeling of strangeness, perhaps some domestic difficulties - she was unprepared, on the contrary, for the immediate sense of belonging. It was almost as if the house had been waiting for her to come, now enfolded her in its bleak embrace, like a lover. She never tired of walking from room to room, standing in the doorway and enjoying the exquisite pleasure of surveying this particular domain...admiring the gracious Georgian structure, the frescoed ceiling, the elegant line of the windows, the gleaming polished wood of the long floors...the richly coloured tapestries and the strong, beautifully proportioned furniture. Altogether her response to the house contained a strong element of earthy, almost physical awareness, she loved walking down the curving staircases, caressing the smooth wood of the bannister, fondling the intricately carved headpiece at the bottom. Always she was finding new surprises, new sensations. Picking up a tiny ceramic mask, brought back once by her grandfather as a memento of mining years in Mexico, she was at once aware, vividly, indeed disturbingly, of ancient influences. Probing with her fingers around the thick curves she might almost have been probing, as if by instinct, into the mysteries of all supernatural life.

It was the same wherever she went in the house, upstairs, downstairs in my lady's chamber. Down in the basement the huge room that had once been a smoking kitchen for the large families of other generations now lay empty and unused - yet, somehow, among its subterranean shadows, the girl was aware of the element of surprise,

the unknown, perhaps danger. And if again, she ascended the steep winding stairs that led up to the enormous attic, with tiny dormer windows tucked at every corner, then indeed there was a sense of unexpected awe, looking out upon the wide unending panorama of bare moorland. Sometimes in the early evening, when the orange sun was dying behind the western hills - illuminating starkly the distant slag heaps of the St. Austell claypits - Elly would throw open one of the dormer windows and stare out, feeling the caress of the evening breeze on her cheeks, watching once-normal shapes of the landscape waver and tilt and become fearfully unfamiliar in the gathering dusk. It was easy then to forget herself and her cramped position, to become sunk in some kind of dream, to be lost in that vast sea stretching everywhere in darkening brown, turning to indigo, broken perhaps forlornly by some distant wavering star, first one, then another - messengers with whom she felt at once more contact than with any of her own human kind.

For day after day, indeed week after week, the girl Elly gave herself up to the joyous task of entering into this new, private world. Perhaps because of the very intensity of her new passion there were few external problems. Every morning one of the local farmers dropped in a jug of milk, and if she wanted it, eggs and vegetables. Twice a week the baker from the nearest village, a speckle on the far horizon, called with her solitary loaf - and once a week a smart modern grocer's van came out from Launceston with a parcel of groceries. In one of the outhouses she found a stack of wood logs, enough to last a year or two, perhaps a lifetime... What else did she need? Everything she valued and cared about, suddenly, was here, in the lonely midst of the moors. Once, after a couple of weeks, she walked the two miles to the main road and caught one of the infrequent buses into Launceston: but after half an hour's idle walking round the few shops

she became bored, waiting impatiently to catch the return bus.

After that she did not attempt the pretense of caring about the outside world again. Soon, indeed, she grew to distrust even the occasional visits from the postman on his bicycle, though after a while anyway the letters grew fewer, dwindling to an occasional remonstrance from her mother, whose suburban world already seemed part of another planet. At first Elly scanned these letters curiously, but then she gave up even that pretense, and began tearing them up unopened. Instinctively she knew she was safe there from her parents, indeed from everyone.

It went on like this all the time. What might have seemed a routine, even a dull one, was for Elly always a kind of continuous and joyful surprise. She would awake to the silent, sunlit mornings, aware with pleasure of the huge silence, and of being safe and secure behind the sheltering walls of her own secret home. When she got up and wandered from room to room she gloried in the sense of familiarity with so much that was old and wise and beyond the normal comprehension. She lived a strange, monastic life: in the mornings she did the housework, tidying the rooms, cleaning and polishing, attending to the needs of her home - in the afternoons she donned jeans and a sweater and went out into the rambling garden, digging and hoeing, forking and raking, tending with loving care to the growing plants, taking a pride in keeping alive the luxuriant patches which her predecessor had cultivated.

In the evenings - in the evenings she delighted in going up to her bedroom, spreading out her best clothes and spending perhaps half an hour in selecting from among them the one that suited her mood. There was a long mirror in one corner of her room, and it gave her a strange pleasure to stand in front of this as she dressed and undressed. To know that she was completely and utterly alone encouraged in her an unfamiliar sense of liberation.

First she would flick on the subdued light at the side of the mirror, whose glow illuminated her silhouette softly. Then, with quick, almost irritable movements she cast off the day's dull garments, until she was quite naked. Standing thus in front of the mirror, her body glistening in the dimmed lighting, she was aware of the pleasing effect. She had long, almost boyish limbs that were now filling out with the promise of womanhood: the whiteness of them seemed to flare up to where her breasts hung gently, mysteriously touched by shadows. Yes, she reflected, it was her body that seemed brightest and most vivid in the revealing mirror, that was most vibrant and alive. The face above it - she examined it critically - somehow made less impact; it was detached, observing, curiously anonymous, a watchful, wary face, as if aware of the hidden flamboyancies of that secretive flesh.

Often the girl Elly would remain for endless periods, an hour or more, in front of her mirror, looking at her young, awakening, virginal body not so much admiringly as curiously, as if surmising some experiences and sensation yet to be encountered. At last, with a secretive smile, she would run her tapering fingers up and down the rippling skin, feeling each contour and curve, lifting up the youthful breasts in homage to some unknown god... Then, a little sadly, she would turn away and pick up the dress she had chosen for the evening, setting about the task of preparing herself almost as if it was some very grand occasion. And indeed when finally she went to eat her lonely meal it was hardly any longer an illusion to her that she was not really alone, but that the room glittered with lights and hummed with conversation, that all manner of strange and wild spirits accompanied her on each golden evening...

IT NEVER occurred to Elly that her behaviour was in any way odd, but she perceived so from the occasional curious glances of the farmer or the postman or any other

solitary caller. The effect of this sense of intrusion was to cause her to retreat even more into her circle of secrecy. It was not really difficult, for all that was pleasurable and meaningful in her life was already within such a confinement. Now she took to avoiding seeing any of her callers, leaving little scribbled notes and memorandums and the money needed - a method of transaction quite adequate, but calculated to spread the gossip around the scattered neighbours. "Bit strange, isn't she, that lady up at the big house?" wagged the tongues; and a stranger and eccentric, someone remote from them all, she became.

Such definitions did not bother Elly, if ever she was aware of them, but perhaps the mere existence of such an attitude helped to confirm her isolation. And so, freed of all external contacts, she became curiously exhilarated, able to give herself up more completely to the compelling urges which, she noticed, seemed to come quite naturally to her since she came to live in the granite house.

Yes, even the very granite, its presence everywhere, rock-like and impregnable, surrounding her - even that had a way of communication. Sometimes she delighted in walking slowly around the outside of the house, pressing her fingers along the gnarled, curling shape of the granite blocks...and through their stone shape she could feel mysterious vibrations, as of echoes, of past ages. This was particularly so of the huge granite lintel which stretched across the open fireplace in the big sitting room. Often in the evenings, while the fire light danced warmly in the wrought-iron basket, the girl would stand with both hands held up to touch the lintel...until she would become aware of the most extraordinary sensations, as if through her fingers pulsed a whole strata of ancient sounds, of pipes, of drums, of living voices, even. Sometimes the impact would be forceful, so realistic, that she would feel momentarily frightened and unable to

let go of the hard granite surface - but then somehow it was as if the sound and the movement washed over her whole being, entering into her, binding her to that past life, and she felt a warm glow of contentment, as if lifted up to another plane of life.

Gradually the large sitting room with its long bay window looking over the barren moors became for the girl Elly her haven, her real home. She had long ago discarded the harsh electric lighting, which anyway depended on some rusting machine lying broken in one of the sheds. Now, every evening, she brought in two tall brass candlesticks which she had found and polished assiduously, placing one at each end of the long refectory table. The flickering lights seemed to fill the room with magic and mystery: in unison with the dancing shadows on the oak-panelled walls the girl would sometimes pirouette round and round...and often it seemed as if the room moved with her, the shadows becoming her own, and she would gain unfamiliar confidence, until it might be as if she was caught up in some fierce secret whirlwind of movement that whistled about the room, dancing faster and faster, tossing her head and arching her body, pounding her bare feet into the soft texture of the thick carpet. At such times a tiny, still earthbound part of the girl's mind sounded a warning note: beware, beware, of what you do not know of barriers that may not be crossed... but it was like applying a worn brake to a chariot hurtling down an endless hill.

And then one night, somehow, everything seemed to Elly different, elevated, removed to a higher, more marvellous level. Outside there was a huge full moon hanging like a silvery wonder-world in the middle of the indigo sky. She had watched it fascinatedly from the attic window, then when dusk had fully fallen she had felt impelled to go out into the garden and wander about, smelling the honeysuckle and thyme, listening to the subdued humming of sleepy insects, the occasional cry of a bird...

How still and tranquil everything was, and yet how disturbingly aflame from the blinding moonlight. Wherever she went it seemed that light followed her, bathing all around her as if with a magic spell. And when finally she crossed the lawn and entered the big sitting room through the French windows it was almost as if the moonlight came in with her, awakening even the inanimate things of the room to an awareness of this special and rarefied occasion.

At first Elly lit the candles as usual, but tonight their harsher yellow light seemed out of place and displeasing, and after a while she snuffed them out. As she did so, catching each flame between her two fingers and obliterating it unerringly, she had a weird sensation of power, absolute and unending power...as if not only did the house belong to her, and all that was in it, but the flame, too. As if perhaps everything in the world was in her possession...

Except that distant, but ever closing moon. She turned at last and faced it, opening her eyes wide, letting the vast silvery moonlight fall upon her, splashing her face, raining upon her shoulders, showering her, drowning her, overwhelming...until she could bear the exquisite sensation no longer, was restless, had to jump to her feet and move about the room, cross to the fire, warm her hands, then place them reflectively on the warm old lintel. Yes, tonight, tonight of all nights she knew, the mysteries of the granite were there at the touch of her fingers. Why, already she could feel the pulsating heart-beats of a thousand years ago!

Compulsively, without quite knowing what she was doing, she began to dance slowly around the room. But it was a slowness of restraint, not of mood. Within her she felt burning many fierce flames, was aware of them being fanned, leaping higher and higher, to new intensities. All at once she began to increase the tempo of her movements, swirling round the room faster and faster, in and out

of the long avenues of silver light flooding through the doorways. As she danced faster so she became hotter, and there welled up in her an almost frantic desire not only to feel the fresh cool night air against her skin, but also to be free, utterly and completely free, even abandoned. It was thus, still moving round and round, that she began to divest herself of her clothes, first unpinning the ivory headband so that her coiled dark hair fell in sudden profusion, then gravely unbuttoning her blouse until it seemed to slip away of its own volition - at last unfastening her loose hessian skirt and letting it fall, unheeded, to the floor. Then while, almost unthinkingly, she struck new vigour into her dance, wheeling and stamping and jerking, she quickly stripped away her remaining garments, flinging the last speck of civilized white confinement high into the air and oblivion, aware at last of the most complete and glorious moment of utter liberation.

Now, as she revealed almost defiantly her virgin flesh, Elly became aware that the moon's watchful being had loomed closer and closer, so that its silvery rays now seemed to flood every corner of the room. Caught up in the sensuous movements, caressed by the silver warmth, she danced on round the room, suddenly no longer the former uncertain spinsterish Elly, but a newly born, awakened ageless, primeval woman, writhing sensually in the flaring moonlight, her long dark tresses whirling round and round and forming an endless moving frame for the soft curves of her dancing body.

Yes, she thought, the moon is very strange tonight, so watchful and knowing, so patiently waiting, waiting...almost, she found herself reflecting with fearful anticipation, like some secret lover. Indeed, all at once she had a vivid awareness of being a woman basking in the watchful gaze of her beloved. Such a concept did not seem at all out of the way just then, it seemed but a logical conclusion to all that had taken place before: and so, with a secret smile on her

lips, her eyes closed, the girl Elly began whirling round faster and faster, wilder and wilder, lifting her legs, twisting her thighs, wriggling her shapely shoulders this way and that, parading her heaving, writhing body as if to give pleasure to those unknown, watchful eyes. On and on she danced, feeling some force inside her that would never tire, never ebb. Suddenly in the middle of it all an impish whim came over her, to pretend to escape, to lead her lover a jaunt: like a flash she ran over to the door and out into the wide hallway, crossing and leaping up the stairs two at a time, planning to hide in one of the rooms. But wherever she went, no matter how she darted from side to side, pulling chairs and tables and even wardrobes over behind her to confuse - wherever she went, relentlessly, purposefully, her moon lover followed, tracing her every footstep, shivering her every movement with that cool, chaste yet passionate silvery touch.

Like this, Elly ran through the whole house, in and out of the familiar rooms, sometimes crying, sometimes laughing, sometimes shouting, sometimes whispering, and sometimes almost drunk, reeling from side to side, pulling down great tapestries and curtains, sliding rows of delicate chinaware off sideboards, dragging up rugs and carpets, sheets and bedcovers, turning this way and that, as quick as a will-of-the-wisp, yet not quick enough to escape that pursuing, monstrous embrace.

Until at last, exhausted, she staggered back into the sitting room, into the warm, secluded contained world that was so familiar. All at once she had the sense of no longer controlling her own movements: it was almost as if in a trance that she walked slowly across to the great fireplace and stood, somehow at bay, on the white lambskin rug there. For a moment, bewildered, she looked around as if searching vaguely for the landmarks of a life already left behind her: but she could see nothing, for the dazzling, advancing light of the moon. She could sense its movement towards her,

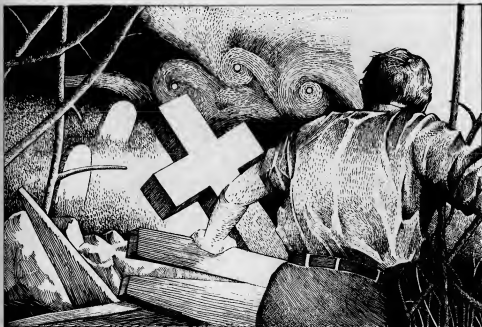
knew it must have sunk lower and lower in the sky until now perhaps it was already at the bottom of the garden - or, no, nearer still, creeping across the lawn, looming its vast silvery shadow at the window. With a faint moan she seemed to slide down upon the waiting white rug, slowly drooping her head so that her long dark tresses fell forward in a pathetic shroud. Her body, still virginally white even on the rug, arched up as if in ritualistic intimation of long forgotten erotic ecstasy; shudders of strange anticipation rippled through her limbs so that gradually she and the rug and the world all around became part of some endless rhythmical pattern, like the sea surging upon a shore, the ripples breaking a river, the whistling hiss of the wild wild wind... Above her head stretched the great wall of granite, impregnated with a thousand memories of moments such as this: she could feel the weight suddenly pressing, bearing down, down... At last, uttering a wild savage scream, as an animal might have done centuries before, she turned, opening her dilated eyes, parting her red lips, baring her white teeth, offering herself up, her whole primitive being, to the weird, unearthly embrace of the devouring moonlight, to that final, elemental consummation.

A week later, puzzled by the silence, one of the tradesmen broke in and found her, and went hastening to call the police. When they came and found the whole house in chaos, the woman dead with every sign of sexual assault, they sought for an obvious solution. There had been a travelling fair in the district, a rough lot most of them, perhaps one had wandered up and - well, she was an eccentric woman by all standards. The only thing that was rather puzzling was the strange look upon the woman's face: it wasn't pain or anything like that, more like pleasure - you could almost say a kind of ecstasy. Yes - the policemen shook their thick-set heads and went off back to their mundane duties - it was a strange business all right. In fact you might say it defied explanation.

IN THE DISTANCE THEY SEE
SARAH BROWN— AND CRY—
BY **CROM**— WE NOW FIND THIS
ARTIST'S AGENT OF WHOM WE
HAVE HEARD MANY FINE THINGS
AT 10 THE AVENUE EALING LONDON
W 13...IF ONLY OUR AQUILONIAN
TELEPHONES WORKED, WE COULD
DIAL **01-998 0390** TO DISCUSS
REPRESENTATION — YET MITRA
MAY ALLOW US TO SEND OUR
SAMPLES BY POST WITH A
SELF ADDRESSED AND
STAMPED ENVELOPE FOR
SAFE RETURN



For Peter Coleborn, writing fiction is a relatively recent development. He has had one story, *Post Mortem*, published in the journal of The British Fantasy Society, *Dark Horizons* (issue 17) and a further tale up-coming in the same periodical. He is also working on a few fantasy stories which he hopes to see published eventually. Here, however, is a horror story and a pretty gruesome one, called...



"Suddenly, wood splintered, tore away from the retaining screws."

The Exhumation

By PETER COLEBORN

Illustration by SIMON HORSFALL

HE STOPPED beneath a flickering street lamp. Its intermittent orange glow battled feebly against the thick viscid fog. He peered back on his tracks, listened. After several moments he was satisfied; he was alone. A glance at his wrist watch showed him the time: five minutes past midnight.

In his mind a myriad questions vied for his attention: was he too early, too late; will they be there; will the side door be unlocked; had he enough? He shifted his grip on the carrier bag he was holding, feeling comfort in its weight. Gently, he placed the bag on the pavement, resting it against his leg. He turned his jacket collar

up, readjusted his scarf, then contemplated a cigarette, but decided against it. Beads of sweat trickled down off his forehead, despite the cold. He was excited, nervous, scared, but determined.

I'll show the bastards, he thought. Oh yes, I'll show them; they won't know what hit them. An evil grin appeared on his face. Carefully, he picked up the carrier bag. After all, he had to be cautious, just in case... He stepped back into the night, out of the meagre microcosm of spasmodic illumination. Almost instinctively he continued walking, treading a path he had followed so many times before.

This is going to be fun, he thought. Well, for God's sake, it is their fault, the pretentious hypocrits. Know all the answers, do they? Like Hell, they do! I'll show them. His mind was a labyrinth of thought processes, all leading to the same inevitable conclusion: he was going to get even, he was going to make them regret.

The idea occurred to him that he was mad, his brain seemed to shout, we're all insane! Crazy! I'll teach them to ignore me... This is going to be fun. The thought patterns reiterated themselves, recycling in his brain. I'll show the bastards, I'll show them...

"Good evening, young man." He stopped, heart in mouth; he had heard something, he was sure of that. "It is a thoroughly miserable night for one so ill-attired to be out in."

From out of the fog, tendrils of mist caressing his face, his body, stepped the vampire; his eyes shone with a preternatural brilliance, teeth a ghostly white.

The vampire's victim spun around, gazed into the unearthly countenance. He screamed, dropped the carrier bag. Fifty pounds of unstable explosives, its trigger mechanism ineptly primed, fell heavily onto the pavement.

DR. GEORGE Stirland was perplexed; he reread the laboratory results through again. He sat forward in his chair, elbows on desk, his head supported in the cradle of his hands.

He sighed, reached for his pipe and relaxed back into the chair. "Max," he eventually called. "What do you make of these?"

Dr. Maxwell Sykes crossed the room, picked up the results from Stirland's desk top. He glanced at the first page. "The 'bomb-couple'? A couple of terrorists, I should imagine, with clumsy hands. What's the problem George?"

"Difficult to say precisely. As you're aware, the pair were literally blown to pieces; their bodies were found scattered over a considerable area. It made forensic work almost impossible, but," Stirland paused for effect, "I'm certain that one of them was dead prior to the explosion."

"Hmm, that'll put a completely different picture on the situation. But," Sykes asked, "what's actually worrying you? We've dealt with similar cases, so?"

"The youth, who we've identified as Abbotson died in the explosion. The other, much older I'd guess, is an enigma. As yet he remains unidentified. He died before the event." Stirland paused, drawing on his pipe, exhaling thick blue smoke.

"And?"

"Abbotson was of no great stature. Quite puny, in fact. He would have had enough trouble carrying the explosives alone. He couldn't have transported the body as well. There is no evidence to suggest a third party."

Sykes was becoming annoyed with Stirland's rambling manner. "Come to the point then George. The youth could've murdered the elder, then for some reason the bomb exploded."

"No!" Stirland stared into his companions eyes. "He had been dead for several hours, days even, before he was blown-up. There's some autolysis, but generally his tissues are in a superb state of preservation. Not embalmed. And," Stirling added, "there are footprints leading to the scene that would match an individual of his expected weight and height."

Sykes sat down in a chair drawn up beside the desk. His only comment: "So..."

Stirland shrugged. "He had a weird dentition: massive canines.

I'll show you them later. He also had an unknown blood group. In fact," he added, "I'd almost say that he didn't have a group. It's so..."

"Odd," Sykes suggested.

"Yes. Most odd. There're a hundred incongruencies in these results." Stirland picked up the file, dropped it back onto the desk. "There are so many contradictions, Max. God knows what I'll report to the coroner."

DR. STIRLAND relaxed in his black leather chair, eyes half closed, drawing on a pipe. The tobacco smoke rose lazily, caressing his face as it drifted ceilingward. Through the blue haze, from beneath heavy eyelids, he watched the eye floating within a jar of formalin. The eye, he had decided, belonged to the elder of the two bomb victims. Despite its damaged state, it seemingly returned his stare, glowing with an unnatural brilliance. A shiver ran down his spine as he gazed upon it. Almost, he believed that the eye could still function, that it could see!

That was foolish, of course.

Again, Stirland's thoughts returned to the case. He had given a preliminary report to the coroner that afternoon, but only postponing the inevitable, inescapable conclusion for a week, maybe two. Inescapable? What do I mean? God, he thought, why did I get involved with this?

He wondered what Maxwell Sykes would think of his report. No doubt he would say that it was superstitious garbage. Fantasy. Nonsensical rubbish. The undead? Vampires? Stirland knew that his interpretations would be scorned, ridiculed. But, he thought, what do I say? He had followed-up on dozens of pieces of evidence, all seemingly corroborating with his deductions.

He glanced at his watch; it was ten minutes to nine. Outside, thick broiling clouds masked the moon, the stars. Rain attacked the windows in a frenzy, driven by a howling wind. He had to be leaving for home, to his wife and children, to his dinner. The enthusiasm, how-

ever, was lacking. Another five minutes, he thought, then I'll be off.

His eyes squinted through the tobacco haze, enchanted by the immersed orb. He fell into a trance-like sleep; the seconds passed, then the minutes, the hours. Suddenly Stirland jerked upright. A sound had disturbed him. No, not a sound, but a dream; no, more a nightmare, but unlike any before experienced.

First there was the tobacco smoke, blue initially, then permeated with further clouds, but of different colours, soft pastel hues that swirled lazily together. They diffused into a homogenous haze, then separated into their individual shades. The fluctuations repeated themselves, taking up constant patterns, oscillating mesmerically about his eyes.

Then Stirland experienced a rhythm, a pulsation throughout his body, its frequency altering, speeding, slowing, before its gradual synchronisation with his heart beat, echoing within his ears, his head.

The vapourous colours, their persistent motion, the rhythmic vibrations acted in concert, instilling a tranquility into his being, occluding his brain, yet opening gates to his mind. As time passed, and the dream wore on, his mesmerized state became receptive to the vampire's insidious calling: Come to me, the words were faintly received, come to me, come, help me. Stirland's mind reverberated with the summoning, until:

"Come!" The order roared through his mind.

Stirland awoke. He sat upright, screwing his eyes against the thick tobacco smoke, now possessing its usual azure cast. His head ached acutely. He looked towards the desk. The vampire's eye was glowing, a glaucous luminescence emanating from its pupil. Slowly, Stirland extended his arm towards the jar.

"Stop!"

He froze. The control was absolute.

"And now, good doctor, come to me. Come!"

The mind of Stirland was overwhelmed by the vampire's influence. He knew only one thought: he must go to the vampire, heed the summons.

He rose from the chair, walked stiffly to the door, down the corridor, out into the damp night. The rain had ceased, the winds abated. The clouds were breaking up, revealing a sky peppered with bright stars. Moonlight reflected on the wet road, pavement, verges. Garbed inadequately for the cold night, Stirland disregarded the chill; too, he saw nothing nor heard any sounds. He could only follow the vampire's unending persistent commands.

"Come to me, good doctor, come..."

A sound emitted from Stirland's throat; it repeated itself: "I am coming, Master..."

On the desk, in Stirland's office, immersed in a jar of formalin, floated a damaged eye, that appeared indistinguishable from any other in a similar condition.

FROM somewhere he had found a spade. Stirland traversed the cemetery, walking irreverently across numerous graves. He reached that of the vampire; without hesitation, without pausing to rest, he began digging. The day's rain had permeated down through the soil. The earth clung tenaciously to the blade of the spade, like heavy clay. Time flew, but his progress was slow. Stirland, completely oblivious, was cloaked in the mud, as if he wore a dark sodden shroud.

Eventually his spade hit the unembellished coffin. Fresh energy flooded his muscles; he worked in a renewed frenzy, and rapidly dragged the coffin loose, then up, onto the surface. The moon reappeared from behind a cloud, casting its wan light on the scene below.

Stirland dropped the spade, began clawing at the coffin in an attempt to open it. Finger nails snapped, blood flowed liberally from gashed hands, mingling with the waterlogged earth. From inside came the silent, albeit frantic

cries of the vampire.

"Hurry you fool. Open this damned thing. Let me out!" Much of it was incomprehensible. Stirland, however, worked blindly, scratching away at the coffin. "Hurry," the vampire continued, "I must see my disabilities, why I am unable to escape this damned internment."

"Quick, mortal vermin, release me!"

The thoughts of the vampire became more coherent: Stirland retrieved the spade, began smashing at the container confining the vampire. Suddenly, wood splintered, tore away from the retaining screws. Then the lid was off, causing Stirland to slip back onto the mud.

"Still I cannot move!" The cries of the vampire reverberated within Stirland's skull. "Still I am unable to escape! Doctor! Look upon me! Look! Let me see through your eyes. Look!"

Stirland crawled over to the coffin, pulled himself up to gaze over its edge. Through the doctor's eyes, the vampire stared upon his remains.

The scream tore the doctor's mind asunder. Again he was flung back onto the earth, smashing his head on a plain unadorned headstone. He lay unmoving, his life seeping away, with his blood, into the soil beneath him.

"Doctor. Doctor. Please come back to me. Please return to me." The vampire now pleaded, begged the dying man. He could sense the life flowing from Stirland. And perhaps worse, he sensed the imminent dawn. "Return, good doctor, please..."

Somehow, the vampire managed to permeate the unconscious broken mind of Stirland, penetrating the neurones of the doctor's brain. Thus a semblance of life was instilled in Stirland's body. The reanimated Stirland crawled through the mud, dragged himself to the coffin, to gaze, once again, upon the vampire's shattered corpse. The horror of seeing himself thus, for a second time, very nearly lost his control of the doctor, perhaps for all time.

"Now doctor," the vampire's suggestions continued, "you will

take a piece of my body...and then you will eat it."

There was no need for the order, but the vampire nevertheless gave it. The body of Dr. George Stirland, unable to function without the vampire's will, had no choice but to obey. An arm extended into the coffin; the hand, coated in the dripping liquescent mud, blood flowing sluggishly from its wounds, groped around, grasped a piece of the vampire's carcass. The hand was withdrawn, clutching a bone in its skeletal fingers, the shredded flesh hanging limply. The bone was raised to Stirland's mouth. He tore at the flesh, ripping it savagely. It was tough, gristly, its rancid taste augmented with that of sodden clay and congealing blood. After several minutes of chewing, Stirland swallowed the piece. Then again he gnawed at the bone, tearing at the flesh. When stripped of its meat, the bone was discarded, falling back into the coffin.

"And another piece." The ritual was repeated, then again and again. With each ingestion the vampire's control of Stirland became easier.

Soon it was absolute.

"I will survive," the vampire thought, "I will not perish." The body was his now. He knew every organ, every cell, intimately. Dr. George Stirland was dead; the vampire possessed a new body.

The ingested material rapidly became assimilated, fusing with his new self, initiating a change throughout, altering its mortality to that of an undying vampire. The vampire stood, testing his new limbs. He felt unsteady; he stumbled back, almost fell into the newly dug pit. He righted himself, gazed into the coffin. It contained only bones now, stripped bare of all flesh. The vampire pushed it back into the ground, kicking the spade and a few clods of earth in as well. The bones, he decided, can stay and rot (if they will) in this Hellish place. The vampire sensed the rising sun; he must soon retreat, to sleep out the day.

"But primarily," he said, "I must feed. Then I shall sleep." The vampire turned towards the east where the day was dawning.

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RECENTLY, at the 4th annual British fantasy convention, Fantasycon IV, we were very pleased to accept the *British Fantasy Award 1977* in the 'Small Press' category for *Fantasy Tales* issue 1. Within these pages we would like to reiterate our thanks to our readers, writers, artists and advertisers - your support and interest has helped us immensely in producing a semi-professional fantasy magazine in an amateur capacity. Thanks are also due to the British Fantasy Society members who nominated the issue and to the 'Small Press' panel who made the final voting, which won us the award statuette.

We would also like to thank all of our readers for the incredible amount of support and faith they have shown in *Fantasy Tales*, by simply buying the magazine. This has led us, logically enough, to our third issue, but when we say that *Fantasy Tales* number 1 was a gamble for us, financially and otherwise, you will realise what we mean. We're pleased to note that issue 1 is now officially out of print from us (although some dealers will no doubt still hold a few copies in stock at this moment), but it is good news for the continued success of the magazine.

But the future for *Fantasy Tales* is by no means financially sound, and our readers might like to consider additional help to us by simply ordering their copies *direct* from the editorial address. We hardly wish to take sales away from the science fiction and fantasy book dealers, but if a few more regular readers ordered direct (leaving the dealers to sell to *new* readers), then our ability to fund the magazine and increase the page-count

in future issues would become a reality - to *your* benefit. We are loathe to increase the cover price of *Fantasy Tales* as we believe 60p or \$2.00 is a reasonable price to charge, but since we pay for stories, the more cash available means a higher quality all round. The total cost of ordering FT from the London address on page 1 is 72p or \$2.50, which includes postage and packing. All cheques and postal orders should be made payable to 'Fantasy Tales'. We hope some of you will consider this a better way of obtaining future issues and our thanks in advance to any of you who take up our suggestion...

It seems this editorial has been more of a 'Thank You' notice than anything else, but in the circumstances it would appear to be a very appropriate way to begin a proper editorial *presence* in the magazine. You will have noticed a lack of such in the past two issues (except for story notes and a brief introduction to *The Cauldron*) as this was simply a policy - FT was designed to stand or fall on its contents and no sermonising was to detract from what the magazine is meant to be - a 'pulp' fantasy fiction digest intended for pure enjoyment. We would like to see, however, more letters of comment on our fiction and artwork; we began *The Cauldron* last issue and a few more comments are encapsulated herein, but more letters would be welcome. Whether you hate a story or an illustration, or love it, we'd like to know.

BETTER THAN WEIRD TALES?

Jon M. Harvey, from Lee-on-Solent,

Hants, compares us to *Weird Tales*: "For years we in Britain were the poor relatives in Fantasy matters; almost all the good fanzines around came from the far side of the Great Pond. Then, when the semi-professional magazines came along, it was the Americans who produced them, because they were the only ones who could afford the costs. Now, however, I think that we have something to offer the Americans! Or should I say that you have? For all this Nostalgia kick over *Weird Tales* and its authors, the Americans have failed in their efforts to emulate the originals. WT specials abound; WT reprints; WT facsimilies; even a brief revival of the magazine itself...all have failed to capture the 'spirit' of the old magazine, and, what is more relevant, all have morbidly reprinted the old stories *ad nauseum* - ignoring the bad quality of many of those tales! And this is where *Fantasy Tales* comes in: *Fantasy Tales* has captured the look and atmosphere of the old WT - in digest form. It's also printing new material, rather than relying on the worn-out tales from way-back. *Fantasy Tales* is *Weird Tales* brought into the 1970's with Ramsey Campbell and Adrian Cole replacing H.P. Lovecraft and R.E. Howard...no, that's not exactly true as both Ramsey and Adrian are individual writers whose work are by no means 'copies' of Lovecraft and Howard...but they are as new and original as were Lovecraft and Howard in their day. In its way, *Fantasy Tales* is better than WT ("Oh, sacrilege!" I can hear being shouted from various quarters). It's true. You look at the standard of artwork and - maybe more important - its reproduction in the old WT's and compare them with those in *Fantasy Tales*. There's no comparison... *Fantasy Tales* has much superior artists and reproduction. Oh, I know about Finlay, Bok, Dolgov and the rest, but for one or two good pieces per issue, the rest were poor. In *Fantasy Tales* 2 alone we find Jim Pitts, Jim Fitzpatrick, John Grandfield, Dave Lloyd, Steve Fabian, Alan Hunter, Russ Nicholson and

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that beautiful two-page spread by Graham Manley! Okay, so some of those illustrations are not the best these artists have ever done, but they are still good pieces - well above the average standard of the old WT artwork. All I can say is, 'Carry on, both of you. Please!'"

A REGULAR READER

Brent Henshaw, of Coventry, writes: "FT 2 was great. I can't find fault with any of the writing. *The Hypnocosm* by William Thomas Webb was, to my mind, one of the best stories in a long while and deserves to win an award. I hope we see more of Mr. Webb's work in the future. I wasn't too keen on the artwork but I did like the back cover. Anyway, if FT 2 is an example of things to come then you've got yourself a regular reader."

FAULTLESS PRESENTATION

The author of last issue's *Borden Wood*, Sydney J. Bounds from Kingston on Thames, Surrey, writes: "I finally made the time to read through FT 2, and found it an improvement on number one. Presentation seems faultless. In particular I liked the Jim Pitts illustration to *Scars*, and the Manley illustrations for Lumley's verse. *Scars* was about the best story. I think Ramsey's letter pinpoints my own feelings, you've modelled FT closely on *Weird Tales*. This doesn't bother me as an old-time reader of WT, but how will it go down with the new young readers? (After all, the only successful fantasy mag since WT was *Unknown*, and that was totally different). If you aim to succeed as the new fantasy mag, maybe you should not hew too closely to the old WT format? Nice to be illustrated by Alan Hunter again after all these years - he illustrated some of my early stories in Ted Carnell's *New Worlds*."

NEW STORIES BY OLD WT WRITERS?

Koen Olie, of Nw. Loosdrecht, Holland, writes: "I've just received *Fantasy Tales* 2 and I must say

it is very impressive. It is a lot better than the short-lived *Weird Tales* reprint by Sam Moskowitz. The illustrations of Jim Pitts reminds me of the late (and great!) Hannes Bok. K.E. Wagner alone is worth the money. It would be great if you could get some new stories from writers of the "old" *Weird Tales*, like E. Hoffmann Price, M. Wade Wellman, C. Jacobi, a.o.

AN IMPROVEMENT ON FIRST ISSUE

From, Alan Hunter, Bournemouth: "Having now managed to fully digest issue 2 at leisure, here are my comments - on the whole, I consider this an improvement on issue 1. This was not a tremendous improvement (after all, issue 1 was quite good) but there was a better variety in the stories and illustrations, making the issue more entertaining. *Scars* was a good story, but I have two minor criticisms - first, I thought some of the descriptions in the opening pages were a little overplayed, introducing the horror mood a little too soon. Second, was the rather indefinite ending. Despite that, however, it was still good. *The Hypnocosm* was, in my opinion, the best story in the issue. I thought the story had a really original idea and a surprise ending. *Borden Wood* is my choice for second place. Another surprise ending, although the basic idea was not so original. *Accident Zone* was an unusual story with some unusual descriptive writing. *The Last Wolf* was good, and *The Feast of Argatha* was an entertaining but brief piece of high fantasy. Every story was good, and the best must surely be a matter of personal choice. I like the inclusion of a little poetry and *The Cauldron*, brief though it was, injected a little life and background into the issue."

ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

The art for *A Sonnet for Insanity* is by Alan Hunter. *Fantasy Tales* is illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian. Jim Pitts contributed the headings for both the *Contents* page and *Beruthiel*, and the heading for *The Cauldron* is by John Grandfield.



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